

Reevaluating the Supercrip

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The article assesses the term *supercrip* and its use in disability studies scholarship. The traditional use of the term encompasses a wide variety of representations. Therefore it is argued that in order to understand and analyze these different manifestations with specificity and nuance, we must theorize *supercrip* as a collection of narrative types created by different mechanisms which vary by medium and genre. The conclusion is that by attending to narrative mechanisms, type, and context in this way, disability studies scholars will be better able to differentiate and understand the production, consumption, and appeal of *supercrip* narratives in popular and mainstream culture.

Introduction

Supercrip: at the very word, disability studies scholars sharpen their critical claws to rip to shreds what has now become quite the infamous figure. While the term *supercrip* has much currency and recognition in the field, it has taken on an assumed meaning that is not beneficial to rigorous disability studies scholarship. Calling a representation a *supercrip* narrative, it seems, is a clear and unquestioned critique, the ultimate scholarly insult that dismisses the possibility of finding recuperative, liberatory, or positive aspects of a representation. However, one might ask, if *supercrip* has taken on self-evident meaning which requires little scholarly evidence or explanation, that is, if calling something or someone a *supercrip* is both the analysis and the critique, then what intellectual work is the term doing for us? What questions are constrained by reliance on *supercrip* as a broad analytical term? How might a different framework help us to understand not only how *supercrip* narratives are produced, but also their impact and appeal? What do we lose and what do we gain by changing our approach to the *supercrip*?

This is not to say that critiquing *supercrip* representations is intellectually irresponsible or politically useless. The *supercrip* is indeed an unquestioned and potentially damaging stereotype of disability that must be challenged. However, if we are going to engage the concept, disability studies scholars must be specific in our use of the term. By honing *supercrip* as a critical device, we open up disability studies to increased engagement with mainstream genres

that are often dismissed as too normative, regressive, or uncomplicated to be of value to improving the lives of people with disabilities.

This article explores the term *supercrip* and its use in disability studies scholarship. I demonstrate that rather than having one self-evident meaning, *supercrip* actually encompasses a large body of representations. As a result, building upon the work of Amit Kama, Carla Filomena Silva and P. David Howe, Catherine Scott, and José Alaniz, I offer a typology of, and contextualized approach to, the *supercrip* to help improve the term as a tool for critical analysis. I argue that using more specific terminology within the overarching category of *supercrip* allows us to differentiate between types of *supercrip* representations. I contend that these *supercrip* types are created through specific narrative mechanisms that can vary within medium and genre contexts. By taking up this adjusted approach to analyzing *supercrips*, disability studies scholarship can better evaluate how these representations are produced and the cultural work they perform.

Changing how we approach the *supercrip* means changing attitudes about the supposedly obvious meaning of mainstream representations that have often been regarded as mostly regressive within the field of disability studies. Such change, I argue, is necessary to developing innovative disability studies analyses of representations which have large audiences; representations which are, problematic or not, influential. Several disability studies scholars have claimed that we must study representations of disability because these are the images of disability with which people most often engage and which most impact individuals' perceptions and treatment of real people with disabilities.¹ If we take such arguments to heart, then nuanced engagement with *supercrip* representations is critical to the rigor and vitality of the field. By not having a flexible theoretical framework to address *supercrip* representations and take seriously their ideological influences, disability studies risks missing out on important cultural conversations about disability occurring outside of the academy.

Defining Supercrip: What (We Think) We Already Know

Generally, the *supercrip* is recognized as a stereotypical representation of disability that appears in contemporary journalism, television, film, and

1. Snyder and Mitchell argue that representational research "is necessary and even paramount to influencing the ideological agenda of disability" (201). Similarly, Quayson argues that representations of disability have "a direct effect on the social views of people with disability" (19).

fiction. Joseph Shapiro defines the supercrip as an “inspirational disabled person [...] glorified [...] and] lavishly lauded in the press and on television” (16). Providing more specific examples, Eli Clare writes that the supercrip is

one of the dominant images of disabled people [...] A boy without hands bats .486 on his Little League team. A blind man hikes the Appalachian Trail from end to end. An adolescent girl with Down’s syndrome learns to drive and has a boyfriend. A guy with one leg runs across Canada. The nondisabled world is saturated with these stories. (2)

Almost all discussions of supercrips focus on how these representations rely on concepts of overcoming, heroism, inspiration, and the extraordinary. Additionally, most scholarship also mentions how these representations focus on individual attitude, work, and perseverance rather than on social barriers, making it seem as if all effects of disability can be erased if one merely works hard enough. On this issue Clare writes,

Supercrip stories never focus on the conditions that make it so difficult for people with Down’s to have romantic partners, for blind people to have adventures, for disabled kids to play sports. I don’t mean medical conditions. I mean material, social, legal conditions. I mean lack of access, lack of employment, lack of education, lack of personal attendant services. I mean stereotypes and attitudes. I mean oppression. (2)

From this general overview it is clear why the supercrip is the object of much scholarly critique; however, to engage this concept in the field of disability studies today, it behooves us to trace its intellectual and linguistic lineage as well as its varied use in contemporary scholarship.

In order to trace the origins of the supercrip, we must distinguish the overall category of narratives about exceptional people with disabilities from the term we now use to refer to these types of representations. The discursive use of supercrip narratives (without the actual label of supercrip) can be traced back to at least the early 1900s when *Outlook*, a magazine covering the blind community, featured stories about blind people who held jobs, attended college, or played sports in order to change societal perceptions of blind people (Riley 135–36). The supercrip also has conceptual connections to freak shows of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues that, like the freak show, supercrip narratives in photography and film rely upon “the oldest mode of representing disability”: the visual rhetoric of wonder (59). She writes,

Modernity secularized wonder into the stereotype of the supercrip, who amazes and inspires the viewer by performing feats that the nondisabled viewer cannot

imagine doing. Contemporary wonder rhetoric emphasizes admiration rather than amazement, in part because bourgeois respectability now deems it inappropriate to delight in staring at disabled people. (60–61)

Conceptually, therefore, supercrip narratives have been around long before the term itself. While the exact origins of the word are unclear, supercrip seems to have some relationship to Superman, the comic book, television, and film character who performs incredible feats of strength and ability such as flying, super speed, and X-ray vision. Supercrip narratives often play upon the rhetoric and connotations of this cultural icon. Temporally, the term *supercrip* seems to have emerged colloquially within the disability rights community in the mid- to late 1970s as a pejorative term for overachieving people with disabilities, though it's unclear if the term originally applied specifically to representations or to individual disabled persons directly.²

In contemporary disability studies scholarship, discussions of the supercrip almost always include reference to the above-mentioned concepts of overcoming, inspiration, and exceptionality; however, other major themes also emerge. Scholars tend to agree that supercrip narratives emphasize (over) compensation for the perceived “lack” created by disability. Several scholars assert that supercrip narratives not only set unreal expectations for people with disabilities to “overcome” the effects of their disabilities through sheer force of will, but also, simultaneously, these representations depend upon our ableist culture's low standards for the lives of disabled people. Silva and Howe write, for example, that supercrip narratives “can be considered to be an expression of society's low-level expectation placed upon people with disability, which ultimately perpetuates the understanding of their existence as a ‘problem’” (175).³ Other scholars have insisted upon the importance of technology and sports to the development of contemporary supercrip narratives.⁴ As a whole, the term seems to have gained much scholarly currency since the late 1990s and a review of the literature reveals that almost every year some publication uses the term *supercrip*, often in the article or chapter title. It is due to this frequency of use that *supercrip* has obtained such a well-recognized status in the field, to the point where, I argue, the term is used and assumed understood with merely a single-sentence definition, sometimes with no citations of other scholarly supercrip critiques at all.⁵ I find such use to be detrimental to developing

2. The earliest print use of supercrip I have been able to locate is in Jacks, which uses the term as a satiric allusion to Superman. The earliest scholarly reference I located is in Longmore (35).

3. Hardin and Hardin also make this claim (5.4).

4. See Howe; Booher; Olsen; or Silva and Howe.

5. See Harnett; Riley; Meeuf; or Olsen.

nanced understandings of the variety of supercrip representations produced in mainstream media.

While most scholars insist that supercrip narratives do little to advance complex or socially just understandings of the lives of disabled people, a handful of researchers have challenged the assumed inherently regressive nature of supercrip narratives. Part of this challenge stems from a broader investigation into disability studies' resistance to the notion of inspiration generally. In a chapter reflecting on the life of dancer Homer Avila, Simi Linton considers how it might be legitimate to call someone "brave for defying expectations," suggesting that for people with disabilities, when "our actions are purposeful, our art exciting, or our words meaningful, we *do* inspire" (198). Extending this suggestion further, Wendy L. Chrisman calls for "a consideration of inspiration as a valuable, rhetorically strategic emotion" which may be employed by people with disabilities in intra-group contexts in productive ways (184). Chrisman's work challenges the idea that all inspiration narratives are supercrip narratives and that all supercrip narratives are targeted at a nondisabled audience.

The question of audience and audience reception lies at the center of a second line of scholarship which also questions the assumed negative effects of supercrip representations. This critique has emerged particularly from ethnographers and sociologists who have found that despite the negative readings proposed by previous scholarship, disabled people generally do not always find supercrip representations to be entirely oppressive or problematic. Amit Kama, in a series of focus groups with disabled people in Israel, found in contrast to "the overall critical tone found in the literature, the majority of the present informants hailed this image [of the supercrip]. They consistently expressed a desire for representations of disabled people who are 'larger than life'" (453). Similarly, Ronald Berger, who interviewed disabled athletes about supercrip narratives,⁶ insists that supercrip representations can, from the perspective of this population, be *both* empowering and disempowering (648–49). It is important to distinguish the difference between the underlying assumptions present in the production of supercrip narratives and how audience members actually interpret and understand these representations. Most critics analyze the embedded ableist ideology which serves as the foundation for many supercrip narratives and then hypothesize about how these representations will replicate ableist attitudes among audience members generally. The work of Kama and Berger, however, demonstrates how these representations will not

6. Hardin and Hardin completed a similar study and came to similar conclusions as Berger.

be unilaterally received and interpreted across different constituencies and, as a result, reveal the importance of discussing such counter-readings as viable interpretations. Here disability studies might benefit from engaging work in fan studies which explores not only audience reception, but also how audience members become active participants in cultural productions through in-person and virtual fan spaces.⁷ It behooves us to ask, How do people with disabilities take up, claim, disidentify with, resist, and adapt supercrip representations for themselves?

The above critiques of the supercrip critique demonstrates the need to reevaluate the supercrip and its use in disability studies. There are three main issues in the supercrip scholarly literature which have been rarely addressed: narrative mechanisms, typology, and representational context. The current general usage of supercrip is limited and limiting because of these often overlooked elements. I argue that we must understand the supercrip as, simultaneously, a narrative with various identifiable mechanisms, an overarching term for multiple narrative types, and a form that can vary depending upon medium and genre. These issues, I contend, must be addressed in disability studies scholarship in order to produce more nuanced analyses of supercrip representations.

Supercrip: A Reevaluation

Narrative Mechanisms

First, I join a handful of other scholars when I assert that we must understand supercrip as a narrative that produces a stereotype rather than as a static category that a character or person can fully be or embody. While scholars often refer to the supercrip as a trope, stereotype, model, framework, or narrative, rarely are these labels defined or fleshed out within the literature. I want to build on the work of other scholars to emphasize the need to understand supercrip as a narrative that actively constructs a recognizable stereotype through various mechanisms. In their work on representations of Paralympians as supercrips, Carla Filomena Silva and P. David Howe write that the supercrip “can be defined as a stereotype narrative displaying the plot of someone who has ‘to fight against his/her impairment’ in order to overcome it and achieve unlikely ‘success’” (178). The authors identify three key mechanisms at play in supercrip narratives: the use of superlative language, close examination

7. See, e.g., the work of Jenkins.

and analysis of the body (and I would add mind and behaviors) through a scientific lens, and continuous comparison to a nondisabled norm (Silva and Howe 185–87). Catherine Scott, in her work on Christopher Reeve’s memoir, identifies two additional mechanisms of supercrip narratives: suppression or masking of negative emotions such as stress or depression, and emphasis on personal, individualized attributes such as willpower and determination (Scott 322). Alison Kafer writes that a focus on individuality depoliticizes disability by strategically deploying “rhetorics of disability acceptance and inclusion” in the name of “decidedly un-crip ends” (97). In the case of many supercrip representations, I would add that the focus on individuality is often simultaneously in tension with appeals—typically in the language of inspiration—to a sentimental universal humanity that is supposedly highlighted by supercrip representations.

Representations of Jason McElwain provide excellent examples of the many mechanisms used to construct a supercrip narrative. McElwain first made headlines for being an autistic high school basketball team manager who was allowed to play briefly with his peers at the end of one game. During his four minutes on the floor, McElwain made a rapid series of three-point shots. The game was captured on video and quickly went viral. McElwain even caught the attention of President George W. Bush who stopped to meet the teenager shortly after the story made national headlines. Speaking to the press, Bush used the supercrip narrative mechanism of appealing to a sentimental universal humanity, stating, “It’s the story of a young man who found his touch on the basketball court, which, in turn, touched the hearts of citizens all around the country [... upon seeing the story] I wept, just like a lot of other people did” (Bush quoted in McNamara).

The spirituality website Beliefnet.com named McElwain their 2006 Most Inspiring Person of the Year and their story about him also uses several supercrip narrative mechanisms. The article opens with, “As an autistic teenager, Jason McElwain was used to being ‘special.’ But on Feb. 15, the 18-year-old redefined what special really means” (Winston). Here the superlative language of “special” is combined with an immediate mention of disability—a rhetorical move which often leads to later close scientific or medical analysis of the body and mind. After detailing McElwain’s basketball feats and resulting fame, the story then claims,

But while his achievements on the basketball court were impressive, his actions off the court are even more so. McElwain is nominated for most inspiring person of the year for his unflinching belief in his own abilities and his unwavering determination to push the boundaries of autism. (Winston)

Here the supercrip narrative mechanisms are most clear. There is again superlative language in “impressive” and “push the boundaries of autism,” and now also an emphasis on individual attributes in “unfailing belief” and “unwavering determination,” as well as an appeal to sentimental universal humanity in the label “most inspiring person of the year.” Before the story ends with McElwain’s plans for the future and quotes from his parents, the supercrip narrative mechanism of close scientific examination appears indirectly in a paragraph which explains when McElwain was diagnosed and refers to autism as a “puzzling developmental disorder for which there is no cure” that has been on “an alarming and dramatic rise of 172 percent since the 1990s” (Winston). Throughout the many representations⁸ of Jason McElwain, which have appeared online, in print, and on television, these supercrip narrative mechanisms repeat in a remarkably similar fashion.

By identifying mechanisms of supercrip narratives, we move away from simply assessing a person or character’s actions and instead try to understand how a person or character and their accomplishments are being constructed and represented. This difference is important because using supercrip as simply a category of person means that potentially any disabled person who accomplishes anything or has any notable skill is a supercrip. Using supercrip as a category of person actually makes us complicit in the ableism that constructs such low expectations for people with disabilities that all achievements are considered extraordinary. Rather than using supercrip as a label which is automatically incurred by any successful person with a disability, it is more appropriate to understand supercrip as a narrative form which is actively constructed around a disabled person or character through specific mechanisms. In short, the focus should be less on what a supercrip is and more on how supercrip narratives are created and sustained. Silva and Howe identify three mechanisms of supercrip narratives—superlative language, scientific examination of the body and mind, and comparison to a nondisabled norm—while Scott discusses the suppression of negative emotions and emphasis on personal attributes. I have added here Alison Kafer’s concept of the depoliticization of disability through a focus on individuality and my own concept of an appeal to a sentimental universal humanity as additional supercrip narrative

8. McElwain continued to make news in 2006 when he won an EPSY award for Best Moment in Sports and received a contract with Columbia Pictures for the rights to his story. In 2008, McElwain published a co-authored book about his life. In 2009, he appeared in a Gatorade commercial and, most recently, McElwain made headlines again for running the 2014 Boston marathon. FOX Sports referred to this latest athletic achievement as a “wonderful effort by an inspiring person” (FOX Sports).

mechanisms. Future scholarship should continue to assess how language, visual positioning, structure, plot, and other elements of a representation are used to narrate a disabled person or character into a particular supercrip stereotype.

Typology

Once we understand supercrip as a narrative produced through specific mechanisms, it is useful to further develop our terminology around the types of narratives produced. Many scholars have identified seemingly contradictory messages in supercrip narratives due to the fact that this term is used in reference to representations of disabled people who are presented as extraordinary for doing something ordinary as well as representations of disabled people who are presented as extraordinary for doing something exceptional or rare. Despite this contradictory nature, only Amit Kama has proposed discussing these two types as distinct, suggesting “[f]irst, the ‘regular’ supercrip [who] is a disabled person who can accomplish mundane, taken-for-granted tasks as if they were great accomplishments [... and second] the glorified supercrip who performs highly extraordinary deeds” (450). Each of these types has different implications for attitudes toward disabled people. Building upon Kama’s work, I propose that supercrip narratives produce stereotypical representations of purportedly extraordinary disabled people of three distinct, yet related types. I use Kama’s terminology for the first two and then add a third type of my own.

First is the regular supercrip narrative. The regular supercrip narrative focuses on a person or character with a disability who gains attention for “mundane accomplishments, which because of their impairment are considered exceptionally successful” (Kama 454). These accomplishments include such quotidian activities as playing on a sports team, attending prom, getting married, or raising children. The regular supercrip narrative both normalizes and others people with disabilities because although the representation shows a person with a disability doing something “just like everyone else,” the creation of the representation is premised upon the ableist assumption that people with disabilities do not do these things and thus are not just like everyone else. Regular supercrip narratives are often found in human-interest news stories in print and television as well as reality television shows.

For example, the above words, “just like everyone else,” are featured in the opening sequence of the TLC reality television show *Abby & Brittany*. Krystal Cleary notes that the show, which features young adult conjoined twins living their daily lives, dedicates “extensive lengths of time to the twins applying their makeup, doing their hair, shopping for new clothes, and picking out

their outfits”—sometimes as much as half an episode (Cleary 3). The opening voice over by Abby and Brittany states, “We like to think that the most amazing thing about us is: we’re just like everyone else! This is the story of our normal regular life. Well, our normal conjoined life.” The show focuses on the quotidian and mundane, yet the appeal stems from viewers’ fascination with Abby and Brittany’s body, fueled by the ableist mentality that conjoined twins could not live a “normal” life and therefore everything they do seems incredible and enthralling.

The second type is the glorified supercrip narrative. This is a representation of a person or character with a disability who, according to Kama, “achieve[s] feats that even non-disabled persons rarely attempt” (454). This includes activities like climbing Mount Everest, biking across the country, participating in the Paralympics, or becoming a world-renowned musician. This version of the supercrip narrative, according to Susan Wendell, “may give the non-disabled the false impression that anyone can ‘overcome’ a disability” if one tries hard enough (64). Often these representations, which appear in a variety of media, such as news, documentary, and biography, focus on white and/or wealthy disabled individuals whose racial and class privileges are not taken into account in the narrative. As Hafferty and Foster note, however, people represented in glorified supercrip narratives are not only those “who enjoy extraordinary and compensating qualities,” but also those with extraordinary and compensating “*circumstances*”—such as having race, gender, or class privilege—which may or may not be the result of any individual effort (190). Suppression of privilege, therefore, is a key mechanism of glorified supercrip narratives.

Catherine Scott notes the erasure of privilege in her discussion of Christopher Reeve’s memoir, writing,

Reeve underestimates just how much his celebrity status affords him opportunities not available to most disabled people. When he is initially injured, he and his family are given an entire wing of a hospital, complete with twenty-four hour care from nurses, aides, and security staff, all at no additional cost. (316)

Most mainstream representations of Reeve after his injury can be considered glorified supercrip narratives, particularly due to Reeve’s former acting role as Superman and his continued public emphasis on walking and finding a cure for paralysis. A notable example of Reeve in a glorified supercrip narrative is the 2000 Super Bowl commercial for Nuveen Investments. This ad uses computer-generated images to depict Reeve walking in a supposedly near future with a voiceover that states, “In the future, so many amazing things will happen in the

world. What amazing things can you make happen?” (SuperBowl ads). Reeve’s public focus on walking and a cure was particularly possible because of his race, gender, and class privileges—privileges unavailable to the average person with a disability. This is why Susan Wendell argues that the glorified supercrip narrative⁹ “may reduce the ‘Otherness’ of a few people with disabilities, but because it creates an ideal that most people with disabilities cannot meet, it *increases* the ‘Otherness’ of the majority of people with disabilities” (64).

Finally, I find it necessary to add a third term to Kama’s typology of supercrips: the superpowered supercrip narrative. This is primarily a fiction, television, or film representation of a character who has abilities or “powers” that operate in direct relationship with or contrast to their disability. José Alaniz writes that, in Marvel comics in particular, superpowers “‘overcompensate’ for a perceived physical defect, difference, or outright disability. Often, the super-power will *erase* the disability, banishing it to the realm of the invisible, replacing it with raw power and heroic acts of derring-do in a hyper-masculine fashion” (307). While there are connections and even overlap between the two, I distinguish the superpowered supercrip narrative from the glorified supercrip narrative because the person in a glorified supercrip narrative is represented as achieving something extraordinary through (supposedly) only hard work and determination, whereas the person or character in a superpowered supercrip narrative becomes exceptional by dint of their extraordinary powers and abilities alone—powers and abilities which are not the result of effort, but merely accident or luck. These are the stories of characters like the blind detective with extraordinary hearing or the superhero who gains powers after a potentially disabling accident.

While the superpowered supercrip narrative is most recognizable in fictional representations, it is possible that one could also locate this type of narrative in non-fictional representations of savants and disabled people with high-tech prosthetics and assistive devices. Examples of real-life superpowered supercrip narratives include representations of the Paralympic runner Oscar Pistorius who has been referred to—in superhero-moniker-like fashion—as Blade Runner. In the 2012 Olympics, after several tests and legal battles, Pistorius competed against nondisabled athletes amongst debates about whether or not his prosthetic legs gave him an unfair advantage—that is, an increased, more-than-average ability—over the other runners (Pistorius). In these discussions, Pistorius was constructed through a superpowered supercrip

9. Wendell does not use this terminology, rather she uses “disabled heroes” to refer to what most disability studies scholars would now call supercrips (64).

narrative. The people and characters represented in this type of supercrip narrative in many ways exceed their own embodiment through their abilities, to the point where their status as disabled may be called into question—as indicated in the discussions of the “fairness” of Pistorius competing with nondisabled athletes. We might also consider, for example, the difference between Spiderman, who gets his hyper-able, spider-like powers after being bitten by an irradiated spider, and Daredevil, who goes blind from exposure to radioactive material, yet develops increased power in his other senses. While Daredevil’s disabling accident continues to mark him as disabled, Spiderman’s does not. In our discussions of supercrip narratives, then, we should consider what constitutes disability (materially and socially) in the context of high-tech assistive devices, altered abilities, and fictional worlds.

Context

In my discussion of supercrip narrative types I mention the representational modes in which these types tend to occur. In addition to understanding how supercrip narrative types are produced, supercrip narratives must also be assessed within their medium and genre context. In his discussion of Stevie Wonder, Terry Rowden insists that Wonder has been “disparagingly” and “unfairly” called a supercrip because of the way Wonder is both read and promotes himself as inspirational (116). Rowden writes that Wonder uses his celebrity status to raise awareness and funds “for organizations committed to improving conditions for the disabled” and is at least somewhat self-aware of his class-privileged access to technology for producing the music that brings him such fame (116–18). Rowden’s analysis of Stevie Wonder indicates how it may be useful to approach Wonder’s public self-presentation separately and differently from other media’s glorified supercrip narratives of his life.

Ria Cheyne writes that when analyzing a particular genre it is important to consider specific “genre context,” including plot formulas, stylistic conventions, and generic limits, as “crucial factor[s] in analysing representations of disability” (44). We cannot expect a representation such as a reality television show or a romance novel to do something completely outside the conventions of its genre—at least not entirely. Instead, scholars must work to understand how a representation is working both within and against the boundaries of its medium and genre(s), considering how certain genres historically constrain the representational possibilities for marginalized populations by operating under a set of assumptions or circumstances typically unavailable to those groups.¹⁰

10. For examples of such arguments see Wanzo and Edmondson.

While some narrative mechanisms might translate across medium and genre, identifying the mechanism of appeal to a sentimental universal humanity in a regular supercrip narrative in a romance novel—a genre based upon sentimentality and supposedly universal human emotions and desires—does not mean that appeal to a sentimental universal humanity operates in the same way or produces similar meaning in a glorified supercrip narrative in a documentary film. Genre may even alter what we count as a supercrip narrative at all.

For example, Shawntelle Madison's *Coveted* books,¹¹ an urban fantasy series, focuses on Natalya Stravinsky, a female werewolf with obsessive-compulsive disorder living in New Jersey. At first glance, it would be easy to read Natalya's story across the series as a superpowered supercrip narrative: she is a disabled character with extraordinary abilities. In both human and wolf forms, Natalya is fast, agile, and able to heal from mild to moderate wounds very quickly. She also has incredible hearing, smell, and eyesight, even at night. These heightened abilities are due to being a werewolf and are indeed extraordinary in comparison to humans and some other supernatural beings in the texts. However, Natalya's abilities are completely mundane in the context of her family and larger werewolf community. Here, reading Natalya in the context of her genre becomes critical. Within her fantasy, non-realist world, Natalya is not exceptional or particularly powerful in her abilities as a female werewolf. By recognizing Natalya as normative within her context, we can begin to see how the superpowered supercrip narrative may not be the best framework through which to analyze the *Coveted* series. By taking note of medium and genre context, scholars may find that other theoretical frameworks besides the supercrip are more applicable to certain representations. One of the results, therefore, of understanding the supercrip as a narrative type produced through specific mechanisms and varying by medium and genre is that some representations may no longer fit within the new framework. This is actually a strength of my reevaluated approach because most previous uses of the term supercrip were so broad and general that the term lacked critical meaning. I do not propose getting rid of the term entirely because previous research has clearly identified important patterns of representation. My purpose here is to suggest a more specific framework through which to assess these patterns of representation which will enhance the scholarship, potentially, in part, by identifying some representations that should not be labeled supercrip narratives.

11. The series includes *Collected*, *Coveted*, *Kept*, and *Compelled*.

Conclusion: A Future for Supercrips

Supercrip is a widely used term in disability studies, but it has taken on an assumed meaning that is not always the most useful for critical analysis. The term has become, in many cases, a predetermined marker for critical dismissal rather than engagement. To dismiss outright all representations of supercrips as “bad” is to disregard potentially entire genres of popular cultural productions, ones which tend to have very large audiences. When disability studies scholars reinscribe binaries in our own work, we limit the scope and complexity of the field. Rather than getting rid of *supercrip*, therefore, I have proposed here a reevaluation of the term in order to provide a more nuanced and specific analytic framework. I argue that disability studies scholars should consider if and when supercrip is the most useful mode of critique by asking, In what ways is this representation adhering to the multiple variations of the supercrip narrative and in what ways is it not? Is the supercrip narrative the only or best way to understand what’s occurring in this representation? By engaging the supercrip as a narrative with specific mechanisms and types that can vary by genre and medium, we can be more detailed and clear in our use of the term.

While my interest in this topic originated with my investment in improving disability studies approaches to mainstream representations, this reevaluated approach to analyzing supercrip representations can extend beyond this area and be taken up in relation to other representations, including older, canonical texts. Disability studies scholars have already identified superlative language, scientific examination of the body and mind, continual comparison to a nondisabled norm, suppression of negative emotions, suppression of privilege, emphasis on personal effort and attitude, depoliticization of disability, and appeal to a sentimental universal humanity as mechanisms of supercrip narratives. More work in this area will help us identify additional narrative mechanisms and understand how they shift or have different meanings in different media and genres. Critical engagement with supercrip narrative mechanisms and types within their genre and medium contexts will increase our understanding of how these representations are produced and the potential effects of their consumption. My reevaluated approach to the supercrip provides a language and a framework to explain how a representation is producing a supercrip narrative in specific and concrete terms. This article is intended to serve as a starting point for future scholarship to interrogate supercrip representations in a variety of cultural arenas that disability studies has not yet fully engaged so that we may expand both the strength and the scope of our field.

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