

## METAPHOR AND MATERIALITY

### Disability and Neo-Slave Narratives

“I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm” (Butler, *Kindred* 9). Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred* opens with this line, with the amputated arm of a speaker whose gender, race, sexuality, class, and other identities are not yet known. What readers first know about the narrator of *Kindred* is that they are a disabled person.

In her analysis of the opening of the novel, Katherine McKittrick writes that this lost arm is “hauntingly reminiscent of Sojourner Truth’s working arms, through which Truth claimed her black femininity to white slave abolitionists” (35). McKittrick’s connection between *Kindred*’s narrator, Dana, and Sojourner Truth is apropos, but perhaps not—or not exclusively—in the way she intends. McKittrick connects Dana and Truth as two black women who experienced slavery and whose arms are a reflection of this experience: Truth’s “working” arms and Dana’s disabled one. “Working” here can be read as suggesting arms that are able to perform manual labor and arms that “work” in the sense of being able to function in the socially expected way. Dana’s amputated arm could indeed be read as an allusion to Truth who famously bared her arms and supposedly asked “Ain’t I a woman?” in order to challenge the notion that women are weak and therefore undeserving of the vote.<sup>1</sup> But Dana is also more literally similar to Truth in that they were both disabled. Truth’s hand was disabled in an accident, and she often hid this hand in photos and paintings and never mentioned her injury in speeches (Minister). It is possible, therefore, to follow McKittrick’s

reading metaphorically and interpret Dana's missing, disabled, or *nonworking* arm as symbolic of Truth's visible, able, working arm that helped suffragists gain the right to vote. It is also possible to read the connection between Dana and Truth more literally and materially as two black women disabled in slavery. Is it possible, however, to read disability in *Kindred* as simultaneously metaphor and materiality?

In this chapter, I argue that disability can take on both metaphorical and material meaning in a text—an argument that provides an important foundation for the entirety of this book. Reading for both the metaphorical and material significance of disability in a text allows us to trace the ways discourses of (dis)ability, race, and gender do not merely intersect at the site of multiply marginalized people, but also how these systems collude or work in place of one another. In this chapter, I argue that within the historical and cultural context of American slavery, ableism worked for racist ends against all black people, not merely the ones disabled in ways we would now consider disability. Understanding how the collusion of oppressions plays out in various historical and cultural moments—and the representations which emerge from or about these moments—is key to integrating disability into black feminist theory and vice versa. For these reasons, then, this broad theoretical argument about reading disability as both metaphor and materiality is foundational to this book's specific arguments about how black women's speculative fiction reimagines bodyminds and changes the rules of interpretation as well as its larger intervention into my two main fields of research.

By making this argument about interpreting disability metaphors, I challenge the “methodological distancing” from disability that occurs in much scholarship on black women's writing (and on racial and ethnic literatures generally) through critical interpretation of disability as metaphor (Mitchell and Snyder 2). I also, however, critique the disability studies position against most metaphorical uses of disability. I argue that refusing to read disability as a metaphor ignores the mutual constitution of (dis)ability, race, and gender as social categories and cultural discourses which have material effects on people's lives. Reading disability as both metaphor and materiality, therefore, is essential to a black feminist disability studies approach to analyzing texts, especially those produced by people of color. Using the history of slavery as my example, I contend that scholars must read representations of disability in neo-slave narratives as constitutive of both the discursive use of (dis)ability to justify the enslavement of black people *and* the physically and mentally disabling repercussions of racism for black sub-

jects in the antebellum period and beyond. I argue that neo–slave narratives allow for an understanding of the representation of disability as simultaneously material experience and as metaphor for other mutually constitutive and intersectional experiences of oppression, both in the past and today. I develop these arguments through an analysis of Butler’s *Kindred*.

*Kindred* is the story of Dana Franklin, a twenty-six-year-old black woman living in California in 1976. While moving into her new home with her white husband, Kevin, Dana feels dizzy and is inexplicably pulled back in time to antebellum Maryland where a young white boy is drowning. Dana saves the child only to be threatened by his father with a gun, the sight of which causes Dana to pass out and return to 1976. Throughout the novel this pattern continues: whenever Rufus Weylin, whom readers eventually learn is Dana’s great-great-grandfather, feels his life is in danger, Dana gets pulled back in time; whenever Dana feels her life is at risk, she inexplicably returns to 1976. This bond is complicated by the fact that despite Rufus’s position as a slaveowner and future rapist of Dana’s black great-great-grandmother, Alice, whom she befriends, Dana feels she cannot kill Rufus or allow him to die before the birth of Alice’s daughter, Hagar, who will continue Dana’s family line. To do so would potentially alter the future and risk the lives of Dana and her forbearers, according to the time travel logic to which Dana adheres.<sup>2</sup>

In what follows, I first provide an overview of the neo–slave narrative genre, especially in regard to nonrealism and (dis)ability. Second, I discuss how disability studies scholars have critiqued metaphors of disability before then arguing for the importance of historicizing metaphors, especially in regard to race. In this second section I also survey the historical relationship of (dis)ability and slavery in order to provide the foundation for my literary analysis. In the third section, I examine how disability in *Kindred* has been previously interpreted and then go on to provide my own reading of the text, one that acknowledges the metaphorical power of disability as well as the more concrete meanings and implications of disability in the book. Finally, in the conclusion, I reemphasize that representations of disability must be read as metaphorical and material in an overlapping fashion, an argument that provides a theoretical foundation on which I build later arguments in this book. This proposed approach is important for analyzing the relationship of (dis)ability, race, and gender, especially in black women’s literature and literature from other marginalized groups.

## The Neo-Slave Narrative Genre

In order to understand the neo-slave narrative, one must first understand traditional slave narratives as the genre which neo-slave narratives respond to, revise, and expand on.<sup>3</sup> Traditional slave narratives were texts written by former slaves with the specific purpose of trying to convince readers to oppose slavery. Narrators of these texts attempted to do this by insisting on the humanity of black people and revealing the inhumanity of the slave system. In order to achieve this goal, slave narratives were typically preceded by letters of support from white benefactors who assured readers that the writer was a truthful person who indeed wrote or dictated the story on their own. In the narratives themselves, former slave authors often avoided topics which would upset or offend readers, gesturing toward the horrors of slavery without providing too much detail. Ultimately, slave narratives were used to support abolition and encourage others to support it as well. They were not intended to be particularly literary or radical because their central purpose would be undermined by such qualities.<sup>4</sup> Many authors of neo-slave narratives based their work on slave narratives and other historical records of slavery. Butler's papers at the Huntington Library reveal that she read numerous historical monographs about slavery and the antebellum South as well as the slave narratives of Frederick Douglass, Solomon Northup, Charles Ball, William Wells Brown, Harriet Jacobs, and Harriet Tubman (Octavia E. Butler Papers, "OEB 274," 1975; "OEB 3036," 1993).

I use the term *neo-slave narrative* to refer to a broad range of post-Emancipation fictionalized representations of slavery. Unlike traditional slave narratives, which sought to use consciously constructed personal narratives to promote the abolitionist cause, neo-slave narratives are often viewed as attempts to recover or rediscover aspects of slaves' experiences that were not included in traditional slave narratives. Neo-slave narratives, therefore, use history to (re)construct experiences of slavery and affectively (re)connect contemporary individuals to slavery in ways that the less literary, nongraphic, and highly pragmatic traditional slave narratives often cannot. Despite this recovery element, neo-slave narratives also recognize that due to the marginalized position of slaves and lack of access to independent publishing and education, traditional historical methods of archival research do not necessarily produce new information. As Madhu Dubey argues, neo-slave narratives "situate themselves against history, suggesting that we can best comprehend the truth of slavery by abandoning historical modes of knowing" ("Speculative Fictions of Slavery" 784). In fact, many

neo-slave narratives blur fact and fiction in order to comment on and challenge our ability to read any history of slavery—including slave narratives—as unadulterated truth, encouraging us instead to consider history, especially histories of marginalized people, as inherently partial, flawed, and filtered through human interpretation. The use of metaphor and nonrealism are both essential to this counter- (rather than anti-) historical task of the neo-slave narrative genre.

Since the publication of *Kindred* in 1979, which “set the tone for much subsequent fiction about slavery,” this reconstructive task of reading against the historical grain is often performed through a variety of nonrealist devices, including the disruption of traditional linear narrative, ghost stories, and time travel (Ryan 18).<sup>5</sup> The change to nonrealist representations of slavery is an important difference between neo-slave narratives and traditional slave narratives because the traditional narratives relied on realism to underscore the authenticity, truthfulness, and trustworthiness of the narrative and narrator.<sup>6</sup> Hayden White writes that both history and fiction depend on the distinction between the real and the imaginary. She contends that in order for a text, like a traditional slave narrative, to be understood as true and real in modern discourse, it must “possess the character of narrativity” (H. White 10). As a result of this connection between traditional forms of narrative and truth, our notions of the real, both in historical and fictional texts, depend on concepts of continuity, chronology, and causality. Neo-slave narratives, however, use speculative fictional devices to refuse traditional narrative modes and thus also reject traditional notions of what constitutes the real. These literary devices that disrupt temporality and narrativity “are designed to convey certain truths about slavery that are inaccessible through the discipline of history” (Dubey, “Speculative Fictions of Slavery” 791). Speculative fictional neo-slave narratives therefore work to reclaim lost voices, to critique traditional historical methods associated with white, nondisabled men, and to use fiction and nonrealism to expose many of the untruths and absences of the historical record and cultural memory of slavery.

In addition to being nonrealist, contemporary neo-slave narratives also have a different relationship to (dis)ability than traditional slave narratives. Sherryl Vint writes that traditional “slave narratives aimed to show their black protagonists’ humanity, they required the demonstration of bodily suffering to guarantee authenticity and to spur the reader into sympathy, yet they also needed to avoid reducing the narrating subject to his or her

suffering body” (“Only by Experience” 244). The desire to demonstrate suffering without being reduced to such suffering in a traditional slave narrative depends on keeping the possibility of recovery, healing, and redemption (through the ending of slavery) open and viable.<sup>7</sup> This distinction between the suffering, but recoverable black subject versus the suffering black subject reduced to a suffering (and thus irrecoverable) bodymind can be read as a distinction between nondisabled and disabled black people. Here, only a nondisabled slave narrator presents the possibility of recouping black subjects by ending slavery because the suffering and otherwise disabling circumstances are represented as solely resulting from the slave system. A disabled narrator could easily be interpreted by readers as evidence of the permanent damage done to black people by slavery (or their inherent inabilities regardless of enslavement or not) and the impossibility of incorporating black people into full citizenship, a concept that is traditionally imbued with assumptions of ability.<sup>8</sup> A traditional slave narrative could not, therefore, fully detail the violence of slavery, which disabled so many people without jeopardizing its pragmatic purpose.

In the antebellum period, a slave narrator could not, within the discursive limits of that sociopolitical context, make a claim to rationality, morality, and citizenship while also claiming disability. Since disability and intellectual and moral capacity were viewed in opposition, even if an author had a disability it would not be represented in a traditional slave narrative as central to their personhood or experience. The two major exceptions to this representational absence are, one, when disability is represented as an effect of slavery on another person who is not the author and is then used as an example of the evils of the slave system, and, two, when disability is represented with the narrator, but cured, erased, or overcome in freedom.<sup>9</sup> Even then, however, such representations had to be limited since emphasizing the disablement of black people at large could, once again, limit collective group claims to the rationality, morality, and citizenship denied black subjects during this period. Contemporary neo-slave narratives do not have the same pragmatic, discursive, or editorial limits and are therefore able to represent disability both as part of the reality of slavery and as a central aspect of an individual's lived bodymind experience. In addition to *Kindred*, other neo-slave narratives that represent disability include Alex Haley's *Roots*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*, Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*, Edward P. Jones's *The Known World*, James McBride's *Song Yet Sung*, and Marie-Elena John's *Unburnable*. Despite the fact that disabil-

ity in neo-slave narratives could be read as evidence of the violence against black people in the antebellum period, representations of disabled body-minds in neo-slave narratives are primarily interpreted as metaphors for the impact of racism, whether historically, contemporarily, or both.

### **Critiquing and Historicizing Disability Metaphors**

The relationship of (dis)ability to race, gender, sexuality, class, and other social systems of privilege and oppression is often explored in scholarly writing as symbolical rather than literal, in the form of what I refer to as ableist metaphors, oppression analogies, and disability metaphors. Ableist metaphors, also sometimes referred to as ableist rhetoric, are common phrases and sayings, such as, “She is blind to that issue” or “Their call fell on deaf ears,” which use disability to imply limitation, damage, or other negative concepts. Ableist metaphors, especially within feminist writing, have been critiqued by a number of disability studies scholars.<sup>10</sup> Oppression analogies, on the other hand, compare experiences of, for example, racism and ableism. These analogies have typically been regarded as problematic linguistic moves that attempt to validate one oppression while devaluing or distorting another.<sup>11</sup> Scholars have argued that rather than dispose of oppression analogies altogether, however, we ought to be specific about where these comparisons fail. Critics of oppression analogies encourage scholars and activists to recognize, in Chris Ewart’s words, “the importance of considering their constitutive, imperfect parts,” and to use this recognition, as Mark Sherry puts it, “to unpack the power dynamics which link the two experiences [of oppression], both in practice and in rhetoric” (Ewart 153; Sherry 16). Ableist metaphors and oppression analogies are different from what I call *disability metaphors*, which have been the subject of much criticism and debate in disability studies.

In their pivotal book of disability studies literary criticism, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder use the term *narrative prosthesis* to refer “to both the prevalence of disability representation and the myriad meanings ascribed to it” (4). The concept of narrative prosthesis has since become the primary way in disability studies to critique a representation for negatively relying on disability to further a narrative’s plot or theme at the expense of abstracting disability out of material existence. Others in the field have built on Mitchell and Snyder’s work to similarly critique the tendency to interpret disability as a



metaphor.<sup>12</sup> Lennard Davis writes that “metaphorization can be problematic in terms of identity because it disembodies disability and makes it a template for something else” (*The End of Normal* 20). He argues that unless a film or text is about disability, the inclusion of a disabled character is assumed to have symbolic significance and can actually distract viewers/readers from the narrative, almost like mentioning a gun that is never used. Davis asserts, “In an ableist culture disability can’t just *be*—it has to *mean* something. It has to signify. . . . In this sense disability is allegorical—it has to stand for something else—weakness, insecurity, bitterness, frailty, evil, innocence, and so on” (37; original emphasis). This critique of disability as metaphor, symbol, allegory, and so on has been useful in revealing the ableist tendencies of various representations such as canonical American and English literature and mainstream films. In some instances, however, this now-standard critique of using disability symbolically has prevented critics from exploring how representations can be at once material and metaphorical, obscuring how disability as metaphor, in and of itself, is not inherently a bad thing.

More recently, the conversations in disability studies have shifted to respond to and challenge this general resistance to reading disability as metaphor, particularly among those who work on race and disability.<sup>13</sup> My arguments here are indebted to these existing critiques, and I build on them in a way that particularly emphasizes why reading disability as metaphor and materiality is essential to work on blackness and disability. In her work on disability in postcolonial literature, Clare Barker argues that “vilifying disability metaphors across the board only serves to entrench disability as a form of difference that requires singular treatment,” and disallows critics to be open to “the multiple forms disability representation might take even within one text” (20, 21). Writing about these multiple forms of disability representation, Ato Quayson argues that they oscillate between abstraction and material circumstances (23). This oscillation, I argue, results from the sociohistorical ways in which (dis)ability as a systemic ideology about the expectations and standards for bodyminds, behaviors, and health has, according to Nirmala Erelles, undergirded, naturalized, and rationalized oppressive race, gender, class, and sexuality systems (“In Search of the Disabled Subject” 104–5). In other words, because (dis)ability has been used by dominant social discourse to reference, define, and regulate other social systems, it is imperative from an intersectional perspective to read for the possible metaphorical, allegorical, or otherwise abstract ways in which the fictional representation of disability alludes to race, gender, class, and sex-



uality as well. At the same time, to read the representation of disability as primarily a metaphor for race, gender, class, or sexuality would be to ignore (dis)ability's role in the historical realities of these mutually constitutive social systems and to erase the presence and importance of disabled people within other marginalized groups. As Alice Hall argues in her work on William Faulkner, Morrison, and J. M. Coetzee, "Metaphor and materiality are inextricably linked: to read disability as a metaphor is not to eclipse its physical implications entirely. Instead, a varied and shifting constellation of literal and metaphorical depictions of the disabled body become central" to the ways authors can explore ethical, narrative, and political concerns (174). I argue that black women's speculative fictional representations of disability engage a variety of ethical, narrative, and political concerns about (dis)ability, race, and gender that requires reading disability as metaphor and materiality, directly changing a common interpretive trend in disability studies.

In interpreting the representation of disability in black women's literature and other representations by marginalized groups, therefore, we cannot divorce images of disability from the other oppressive systems also operating within the texts and within the cultures and histories within which these texts are created. Erevelles argues that disability is a condition of becoming that must be theorized in its historical and material context (*Disability and Difference in Global Contexts* 26). In particular, responding to the call for positive representations of disability and the general trend toward celebratory pride narratives in disability studies, Erevelles asks, "How is disability celebrated if its very existence is inextricably linked to the violence of social/economic conditions of capitalism?" (17). Close and careful consideration of the real-world relationship of disability to gendered, racialized, sexual, and economic violence, such as slavery, is essential to interpreting representations of disability because this relationship impacts the creation and reception of representations of disability by groups impacted by such violence. As Dan Goodley argues, "Modes of ableist cultural reproduction and disabling material conditions can never be divorced from hetero/sexism, racism, homophobia, colonialism, imperialism, patriarchy and capitalism" (34). Writers and artists can use disability metaphors to reference this inextricable relationship. Disability studies, black feminist, and other scholars invested in social justice must therefore work to parse the metaphorical and material meanings of disability, remembering that the literal and the figurative impact and shape each other as well.

The relationship of discourse, history, and representation to the material realities of (dis)ability, race, and gender are of particular importance for this book's interventions in disability studies and black feminist theory. The racist violence of slavery and the following Jim Crow era haunted, and indeed still haunts, black bodyminds with continued threats to physical and psychic well-being.<sup>14</sup> The relationship of blackness to systemic disabling violence in the past impacts the relationship of blackness and disability today.<sup>15</sup> My argument about reading disability as metaphor and material existence extends beyond representations of slavery or even literature. However, here I use the neo-slave narrative as a useful example of how disability can appear in literature metaphorically and materially to underscore the mutually constitutive relationship of disability and blackness, historically and contemporarily. Before discussing the representation of disability in *Kindred*, therefore, it is necessary to first understand the specific material and metaphorical (or discursive) relationships of blackness and disability in American slavery. This process of contextualizing and historicizing the metaphorical use of disability in a text is essential to the study of representations of disability and blackness as well as disability and other systems of oppression.

Throughout the antebellum period, the concept of (dis)ability was used against black people in the United States as a method of proving inferiority and justifying enslavement. As Douglas Baynton writes, "Disability arguments were prominent in justifications of slavery in the early to mid-nineteenth century and of other forms of unequal relations between white and black Americans after slavery's demise. The most common disability argument for slavery was simply that African Americans lacked sufficient intelligence to participate or compete on an equal basis in society with white Americans. . . . A second line of disability argument was that African Americans, because of their inherent physical and mental weaknesses, were prone to become disabled under conditions of freedom and equality" (37).

To provide examples of these types of arguments, Baynton cites medical literature from the period which claimed that "drapetomania" was "a condition that causes slaves to run away" because their masters had treated them with too much familiarity and equality, while "dysaesthesia aethiopsis" was an "ailment," supposedly most common among freed slaves, which "resulted in a desire to avoid work and generally cause mischief," also colloquially called "rascality" (38).<sup>16</sup> When reading about these kinds of historical examples, Ellen Samuels reminds us that doctors and anthropologists of the

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries didn't "distinguish between characteristics ascribed to race and those ascribed to physical or mental ability as we do today"; therefore, antebellum white writers were not analogizing race and (dis)ability so much as they were "merging the two into a flexible category of mental immaturity and incapacity" (*Fantasies of Identification* 178). This flexible discursive merging of blackness and disability is an example of the deployment of ableism for racist means and may be one reason why black people today can be resistant to associations with disability; indeed, this association has been used historically to justify the infliction of numerous acts of social, political, economic, and physical violence against African Americans including psychiatric institutionalization or imprisonment, medical experimentation, insurance policy discrimination, and exclusion from the military.<sup>17</sup>

Resistance to association with disability, however, reinforces ableist notions that disability can be equated with inferiority and serve as a justifiable reason for oppression, discrimination, and other forms of unequal treatment. Disability has been a discursive factor in the oppression of other groups as well. Snyder and Mitchell contend "that disability has become the keystone in the edifice of bodily based inferiority rationales built up since the late eighteenth century" and that most marginalized groups have distanced themselves from disability at one point or another in order to gain their civil rights (*Cultural Locations of Disability* 12, 17). Samuels argues that to critique the way scholars and activists have attempted to use "real" disability to demonstrate how "false" disability was ascribed to people of color "is not to deny the pervasively destructive scientific racism directed against people of color . . . [nor] to claim for disability some kind of originary or hierarchical status as the ultimate, grounding category of oppression. Rather it is to foreground the necessity of a fully integrated analysis that proceeds from the central understanding that race and disability are mutually constitutive and inseparable" (*Fantasies of Identification* 113). While I agree with Samuels generally, disability studies critiques of the ways disability has been used in civil rights discourses often seem to assume that the groups in question simply do not want to be thought of or categorized as disabled.<sup>18</sup> Rarely do these critiques consider how some oppressive systems, such as slavery, literally disabled many people.

The particular collective physical and mental trauma of slavery cannot be separated from the discursive elements used to support a violently oppressive system. That is, we cannot talk about how supposed "false" dis-

ability was used intellectually and discursively in medical, scientific, legal, and other cultural venues as a reason for enslaving black people without also talking about how that very enslavement threatened and often actually created mental and physical disability for black subjects. As Erevelles argues, we cannot pose “a simply causal effect (viz. that slavery produces disability) . . . [because] both disability/impairment and race are neither merely biological nor wholly discursive, but rather are historical materialist constructs” (“Crippin’ Jim Crow” 87). This is why reading representations of disability as simultaneously metaphor and materiality is so essential—disability oscillates between abstraction and material meanings due to its social history. In other words, because (dis)ability has been used by dominant social discourses to reference, define, and regulate other social systems, it requires reading for the metaphorical, allegorical, or otherwise abstract ways in which its fictional representation is implicated in gender, race, class, and sexuality concerns as both discursive signifier and material effect.

The material effects of discourses of (dis)ability on African Americans in the United States is exemplified in the slave system. Slavery, which was justified through recourse to ableist discourses, was a traumatic and often lifelong experience for black people that physically produced disability through hard labor, malnutrition, violence, and lack of effective medical care and psychologically through fear of physical and sexual violence, disruption of families and communities, and general inhumane treatment.<sup>19</sup> Extreme scars, missing fingers, missing ears, and mishealed bones were all likely impairments resulting from enslavement. Even free blacks were not protected from this threat due to poor free labor situations, racial violence, and the constant threat of reenslavement or false enslavement. These issues are material facts supported by a variety of historical sources, *not* metaphors for the oppression slaves and free blacks faced. The disabled slave was typically considered a slave of little to no worth because they were assumed to be unable to produce (enough) labor for an owner and could not be sold on the market for a profit. The pain and trauma inflicted on black bodyminds during slavery was regular and often condoned—if not actually inflicted—by law.<sup>20</sup> This social situation that allowed black people to be regularly, violently disabled or killed did not end with the Emancipation Proclamation.<sup>21</sup> When disability studies scholars dismiss metaphorical uses of disability in relation to racial oppression, particularly slavery, we dismiss this history. When black feminist and other critical race scholars read representations of disability as only metaphors for past or continued

racial oppression, we disregard this history. However, if part of the purpose of neo-slave narratives is to incite us to never forget what occurred and to represent what could not be represented before, then we must not only remember slavery as the oppression of black people, both enslaved and free, but also remember it as a systemic racial violence that often produced black disabled bodyminds via ableist discourses of blackness.

In fact, we might consider disability to be one of the major issues that the neo-slave narrative can address in order to understand the continued impact of the history of slavery on black people today. The American slave system, and the Jim Crow laws that followed, produced many of the concrete material conditions that continue to keep black people disproportionately impoverished, incarcerated, and disenfranchised. By understanding the role of (dis)ability in slavery, discursively and materiality—how, as Erevelles claims, “black bodies become disabled and disabled bodies become black”—we might also then be able to better understand and trace how disability and blackness continue to be imbricated categories, how ableism and racism continue to collude and work in place of one another in the lives of all black people and all disabled people, not merely black disabled people alone (“Crippin’ Jim Crow” 87). When I refer to the materiality of disability, then, I mean the ways these representations of disability engage with the societal and individual impact of ableism on bodyminds, historically, contemporarily, or both. When I refer to metaphors of disability, I mean uses of the discourse or image of disability in a text which can be interpreted as referencing something that is not exactly or exclusively about the lives and experiences of people with disabilities. In the next section I provide a reading of Butler’s *Kindred* that acknowledges the relationship of disability and slavery in both its metaphorical and material forms as an example of how such an approach works and why it matters so much in the context of interpreting neo-slave narratives specifically and African American literature more broadly. My focus on *Kindred* as a speculative fictional neo-slave narrative also thereby builds this book’s overarching argument about how black women’s speculative fiction changes the rules of interpretation and analysis.

### **Kindred**

I focus on *Kindred* for this argument about (dis)ability in neo-slave narratives due to the influence this novel has had on the genre. In his book on fictionalized representations of slavery in the United States, Tim A. Ryan

writes that although “few scholars or writers seemed to pay much attention to *Kindred* when it first appeared, the majority of slavery novels published since 1980 use strategies and conventions similar to those of Butler’s work” (144). I also focus on *Kindred* because of the centrality of disability to both the text and the numerous scholarly interpretations of it. In their discussion of previous scholarship on *Kindred*, Susan Knabe and Wendy Gay Pearson write, “Much critical work has attempted to think through the relationship between Dana’s encounter with history and the loss of her arm, yet none of the arguments about it are wholly compelling” (68). Indeed, *Kindred* has been interpreted many times by critics of different backgrounds and theoretical perspectives, yet Dana’s amputated arm has generally been interpreted in one of only three ways: as symbolizing the impact of history, the loss of self, or the disruption of black kinship. The language in these interpretations tends to use—often through puns—words associated with disability without ever acknowledging disability as a material experience. I will provide an overview of the various metaphorical interpretations of Dana’s amputated arm before using close reading to argue that disability in *Kindred* is simultaneously metaphorical and material due to the historical mutual constitution of race and (dis)ability.

Most frequently, Dana’s disability is interpreted as a metaphor for the impact or “hold” of the history of slavery on the present, especially for African American people.<sup>22</sup> In this first vein of interpretation, Dana’s amputation is considered a metaphor for “the permanent, disabling wound that slavery leaves on individuals today,” according to Lisa A. Long; for how “both black and white Americans have been scarred by the institution and legacy of slavery,” according to Angelyn Mitchell; for how “even in the present, racism is still crippling” according to Isiah Lavender; and for how, according to Nadine Flagel, “history can disarm the present” (Long 470; Mitchell 70; Lavender, *Race in American Science Fiction* 69; Flagel 224).<sup>23</sup> Second, Dana’s loss of an arm is also read as a metaphor for the part of herself lost in the past—as a symbol of how she returns “unwhole” due to her interaction with history (Flagel 232). This particular interpretation appears in the work of Flagel, Anne Donadey, Gregory Jerome Hampton, and Patricia Melzer, the latter of whom states, “The experience took a part of her—literally” (Melzer, *Alien Constructions* 100). This second reading generally aligns with a comment Butler herself made in an interview, stating that she could not allow Dana to “come all the way back” or “come back whole” (quoted in Steinberg 473). Finally, Dana’s disability is also read as a metaphor for the

disruption of black kinship and the generally fraught nature of black family histories due to rape, lost records, and forcibly changed names. Donadey writes that “Dana’s severed arm can also be interpreted as a reference to limbs that were broken off family trees through the discontinuities caused by slavery” (72).<sup>24</sup> In a related vein, explicitly emphasizing metaphor, Knabe and Pearson argue that “the most powerful way of understanding Dana’s amputation might be to consider it as a corporeal metaphor for the ways in which black kinship has been dis-membered by the past and black people, through their unrecognizability as kin, deprived of recognition as fully human” (68). These three interpretations—disability as impact of history, disability as loss of self, and disability as disruption of black kinship—collectively represent the predominant ways in which Dana’s disability in *Kindred* has been previously read.

As the examples above illustrate, these interpretations are primarily metaphorical, focused on the symbolic meanings of Dana’s disability while hardly considering the materiality of disability, not only on Dana’s body-mind, but also within the American slave system itself. Lisa Yaszek, for example, insists on the importance of metaphor to appreciate or make sense of the novel, stating, “Butler shows us that while Dana’s literal situation may indeed seem like something out of a fantastic sci-fi scenario, metaphorically it makes perfect sense” (1063). Interestingly, critics typically offer not one, but multiple metaphorical readings of Dana’s disability or the moment of her impairment, indicating that a single moment or aspect of the text can have different meanings even for an individual scholar. Yet only a few of these scholars appear to regard disability in the text as an actual state of being, meaningful in its materiality as well as its metaphorical significance.

Scholars who attempt to provide some material analysis of disability include Sarah Eden Schiff, who notes that Dana’s amputation “is typical of a Civil War injury,” and Sarah Wood, who argues that “Dana bears the visual scars of slavery” literally from being whipped (Schiff 121; Wood 95). A. Timothy Spaulding also argues that Dana’s disability should not be read as “an abstraction” because *Kindred* “forces us to interrogate not only the discursive legacies of slavery in our contemporary moment but also the concrete and material connections between American slavery and late-twentieth-century culture” (29). Spaulding does not, however, suggest what those concrete and material connections might be. All three of these scholars attempt to connect Dana’s disabled bodymind to the materiality of disability in the antebellum period; however, such readings are rare overall and



in each of these examples, the materiality of disability is not the focus of the larger arguments. Only Therí A. Pickens has analyzed *Kindred* from an explicitly disability studies approach. She argues that Dana's "disability remains tethered to historical black experiences of enslavement in America . . . [and therefore] disability moves beyond metaphor or narrative prosthesis to foreground Dana's embodiment" ("Octavia Butler and the Aesthetics of the Novel" 170). As a black disability studies scholar, Pickens insists on the materiality of Dana's embodiment while also refuting Dana's disability as narrative prosthesis because Dana's disability is not merely a device to move along the plot or develop character; rather, it is a material reference to experiences of slavery. Building on Pickens's argument, in my reading of *Kindred*, I argue that disability is used both metaphorically and materially to demonstrate not only the connection between the past and present, but also the connections between disability and slavery, between ableism and racism. I locate these connections in the prologue, the rationale for time travel, the moment Dana is physically disabled, and the epilogue.

First, however, a brief aside. Readers familiar with *Kindred* may wonder why I have not included Carrie, the young slave girl (and later woman) with a speech disability who uses hand gestures to communicate. My analysis here focuses on Dana because of the way disability structures Dana's experience in the text and because of Dana's role as the contemporary person impacted by the legacy of slavery—a role fundamental to the purpose of neo-slave narratives. Carrie, however, is clearly part of the way Butler emphasizes how nonnormative bodyminds were devalued and mistreated in slavery. Carrie is the only child of Sarah's whom the Weylins have not sold because, as Sarah states, "Carrie ain't worth much as the others 'cause she can't talk. People think she ain't got good sense" (*Kindred* 76). In addition to Carrie, other references to disabled slaves include Alice's husband Isaac whose ears are cut off for running away, "old and crippled" Aunt Mary, and an unnamed slave woman "whose former master had cut three fingers from her right hand when he caught her reading" (147, 91). The multiple representations of disability beyond Dana's missing arm underscore the importance of disability to the text and Butler's awareness of the materiality of disability during the antebellum period. However, as discussed in the introduction, a disability studies approach can and should look beyond explicitly disabled characters to understand how (dis)ability as a social system operates in a text, especially within speculative fiction. As a result, I do not include Carrie, Isaac, Aunt Mary, and the unnamed slave woman in my

analysis in order to focus on how disability operates at structural and plot levels in the text in addition to these more brief yet explicit representations of black disabled people.

The importance of disability to *Kindred* is suggested immediately at the beginning of the novel. Readers first encounter Dana in a hospital, her arm amputated. She states, “I was almost comfortable except for the strange throbbing of my arm. Of where my arm had been . . . I moved my head, tried to look at the empty place . . . the stump” (10; ellipses in the original). At the hospital, police officers and doctors ask questions of Dana’s husband, Kevin, suspicious about the circumstances surrounding her injury. As readers, we are not granted any more information in the prologue than the doctors and police because, according to Dana, if Kevin tells the truth of what happened he would “be locked up—in a mental hospital” (11). All that readers initially know is that Dana lost her arm on her “last trip home” and that when pushed to explain how, both she and Kevin insist they don’t know (9). From here, the first chapter, “The River,” moves the text temporally to what could be considered the beginning of the plotline, to when a nondisabled Dana first experiences time travel. I write “could” and “plotline” here because the idea of a “timeline” in *Kindred* is complicated. Technically, the plotline begins with Dana moving into the house and the first moment she traveled back in time, even though the text begins with her in the hospital (an event that is actually toward the end of the plotline). The plotline then continues until Dana stops time-traveling and ends when she visits the site of the Weylin plantation in the present. While a traditional timeline following a linear notion of time would begin in 1815 and continue through 1976, a timeline in terms of the trajectory of the plot would move between 1976 to 1815 to 1976 and so on, since throughout her journey Dana travels to the 1800s and back. As a result, the term *timeline* does not quite work for this novel, and *plotline* is a more appropriate term that privileges Dana’s experience of time and space rather than traditional Western notions of time. L. H. Stallings suggests that scholars should develop “new conceptualizations of time and space in order to change the trajectory of future discourses about race and racial identity. Standard, western, or straight time may be useful for charting the representations or performances of blackness, but they have often failed to fully delineate the experience of being black” (190). If black feminist literary criticism understands texts as not merely representations to be interpreted through theory, but productions of theory in and of themselves, then *Kindred*’s representation of black experiences of time challenge notions of

linearity and causality, emphasizing instead circularity and mutual constitution of events and meaning.

The prologue also does important temporality work by challenging cultural narratives of disability. Typically, disabilities are categorized as congenital (occurring from birth) or as acquired (occurring after birth). As Kafer notes, people with acquired disabilities “are described (and often describe themselves) as if they were multiple . . . the ‘before disability’ self and the ‘after disability’ self (as if the distinction were always so clear, always so binary). Compulsory nostalgia is at work here, with a cultural expectation that the relation between these two selves is always one of loss, and of loss that moves in only one direction” (*Feminist, Queer, Crip* 42–43). In *Kindred*, this before and after self is not so clear since readers are first exposed to Dana’s “after” self. The unidirectional understanding of disability as loss that Kafer theorizes is, therefore, challenged through the novel’s structure, which begins with Dana as disabled and then moves to Dana as nondisabled before she is disabled again.<sup>25</sup> Through the threat of disablement set up by the prologue and the uncertain nature of Dana’s time travel, it is possible to read Dana as always already disabled with no “before” self to even reference. That is, if Dana’s arm is lost in the past or if her disablement occurs somewhere between the past and then present, then Dana never really was nondisabled in the present. This is particularly true for readers because within the timeline of the story, it begins and ends with Dana disabled. Although Dana appears nondisabled throughout most of the novel, we know that she is, was, and will be disabled (again). *Kindred*’s temporality of disability therefore refuses to follow simplistic and ableist conventions of a before and after binary constructed as single directional loss.

It is important that the text begins with disability of an inexplicable and mysterious nature, with disability that has already existed and will exist again. The unaccounted-for injury at the start of the novel causes disability to haunt the text because it is already present in the reader’s consciousness after the prologue. For the rest of the narrative readers know that at some point Dana will have her arm amputated—we just don’t know how or when. Instead, readers anticipate and expect that disablement could occur at any moment in the text, an experience that psychologically gestures toward the vulnerability of slaves to disability at any moment as well. For most enslaved people, impairment of some sort was fairly inevitable given their living and working conditions; the question was not if, but when. The notion that everyone will be disabled if they live long enough is a truism in

disability studies. Disability is sometimes jokingly referred to as an equal opportunity minority category—the only one anyone can join instantly at any moment. When we make such claims in disability studies, however, we should also be attentive to the fact that disability was and is a more likely facet of life for particular populations.<sup>26</sup> The inevitability of disability for Dana is thus established in *Kindred* with the set-up of the prologue, and, as a result, disability becomes a sometimes occluded, but ever-present part of the text through its assured return. In the novel, disability is both presence and possibility, literal embodiment and abstract threat/promise readers know will come true.

This temporally unbounded, inevitable disability in *Kindred* impels time travel in the text. I diverge slightly from the typical assumptions about the impetus for Dana's time travel and contend that due to the impending presence of disability in the text from the prologue, Dana's time travel is initiated by not only the threat of death, but also the threat of disablement. Critics have generally interpreted Dana's travel in time as tied to the threatened lives of herself and Rufus.<sup>27</sup> Marisa Parham writes that Dana is "transported between two distinct times and places by the fear of her own death," via actual violence on her bodymind and the possible premature death of Rufus, which would theoretically disallow her birth in the future (1324). Early in the book Dana herself comes to believe that it is Rufus who brings her back in time, stating, "So he had called me. I was certain now. The boy drew me to him somehow when he got himself into more trouble than he could handle" (*Kindred* 26). Without a doubt, time travel for Dana typically occurs in relation to incidents which produce or threaten bodily harm to either Rufus or Dana. Over the course of the novel Dana is brought to antebellum Maryland when Rufus is drowning, when he sets a fire in his room, when he breaks his leg falling out of a tree, when he is losing a fistfight, and when he nearly drowns in a puddle while passed out drunk. Dana returns to 1976 when threatened with a gun by Rufus's father, when beaten and almost raped by a patroller, when being whipped, when threatened with a gun by Rufus, when she slits her own wrists, and when Rufus tries to rape her. These incidents that pull Dana between the 1800s and 1976 vary in their severity. Some do indeed seem to bring characters close to death and others seem to bring them closer to disablement. It is important to remember the historical specificity of these moments and the difference between medicine in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and medicine in the "primitive age" of the 1800s, as Dana refers to it (42). Indeed, Dana remains

keenly aware of the difference in medical care between her time and Rufus's, as indicated in her interaction with a condescending white doctor and her decision to bring both painkillers and sleeping pills back in time with her. In the antebellum period, the line between an incident causing disability (like a broken leg that might not set right and thus cause a limp) and an incident causing death (like drowning) is much thinner than the line between disability and death today for most people in the United States, despite ableist notions to the contrary.

Dana's ability to travel in time is not only impelled by disability, but it can also be read as a nonrealist disability itself. Traditionally, time travel is associated with science fiction texts in which a character builds a time machine and willingly, excitedly moves back and forth in time. As Sherryl Vint explains, "In many time-travel narratives, the emphasis is on control of the timeline, on ensuring that the dominance of one's 'kind' persists into a future associated with progress. . . . This attitude can be associated with the Western paradigm of science as a relation to the world of dominance and mastery. African Americans have a quite different relationship both to science and to the idea of the future" ("Only by Experience" 243).

Indeed, for Dana, time travel is not facilitated by her mastery of a technological device, but rather by an unnamed psychic connection to her forebears. For her, time travel is not voluntary or fun. It is a difficult and painful experience that constantly endangers her. Some scholars, such as Benjamin Robertson, have read Dana's forced moves through time as "enhanced physical abilities" which give her power over history, albeit power she cannot, or refuses to, use (370). This reading, however, does not reflect how Dana seems to experience time travel. She is constantly returning with injuries and pain from her interactions with the past. She also experiences fear and anxiety about when the pull through time will happen again and if she will be able to survive and return to 1976 relatively safely once more. This fear causes Dana to refuse to leave the house, afraid of pulling a total stranger back in time with her, or hurting people if she were to time travel while driving her car (*Kindred* 116).

The experience of time travel does not empower Dana so much as it disables her or, at the very least, continually threatens disablement. Dana acknowledges that she is being forced to live in a time when blacks are considered "subhuman" and women considered "childlike" (68). As a black woman, Dana is put at increased risk for disablement by involuntary time travel and she seeks to be free of it. *Kindred's* representation of time travel

reveals this speculative fictional device to be highly racialized, gendered, and ability-centric since only certain individuals, such as Dana's white, male, nondisabled husband, Kevin, who survives several years in the past without her, could retain their contemporary rights and privileges when moving into the past. As Jennifer E. Henton argues, *Kindred* is "a striking refutation of time travel as techno-advancement" for all people (108). Thus time travel in *Kindred* is structured by disability in multiple ways: Dana's moves through time are impelled by the threat of disability, the involuntary experience of these moves is disabling, and her place as a black woman in the antebellum past puts her at additional risk for disablement.

This reading of disability as a major structuring element of time travel in *Kindred* is reinforced when we consider that the culminating moment of the text, the moment when the time travel apparently ceases, is the moment of Dana's disablement—the moment when disability returns as material, embodied presence and when, as she kills Rufus for attempting to rape her, she returns to the present with her arm "flesh joined with plaster" in her living room wall (261). Critics have, in addition to their interpretations of Dana's disability more broadly, tended to read this moment as both traumatic and liberating. Flagel writes that Dana "gains more by killing Rufus than she ever did by saving him. Though she does not escape unharmed, she regains physical and emotional freedom," while Schiff argues that "by sinking the knife into his side, Dana—fantastically—rewrites, possibly even unwrites, the narrative of her ancestor's primary trauma" (Flagel 223; Schiff 122). Without a doubt, this moment is traumatic and painful. First, it is mentally and emotionally traumatic because Dana experiences attempted rape and is forced to kill. This then is another way in which the possibility of disability haunts the text in the form of the potential mental disability that could result from sexual assault and having to kill to protect oneself. Second, it is physically traumatic and painful when she returns to the present with her arm stuck in a wall (or stuck in the past, as Rufus held on to her). Dana describes the experience of wrenching her now amputated arm from the wall as "an avalanche of pain, red impossible agony" (261). It is symbolically significant that the culminating moment of the text, when Dana's time-traveling relationship with slavery presumably ends as Rufus dies, is also the moment of disability's material return. The three predominant readings of Dana's resulting disability from this moment—disability as the impact of history, loss of self, or disruption of black kinship—are not incorrect, but this moment also supports my claim that the dual material presence and

threat of disability is a structuring element of the entire novel. Here the prologue's indication of inevitable disability comes to fruition, and Dana, like many slaves in American history, experiences pain, trauma, and eventually disability. She does not simply embody the relationship between these concepts metaphorically, she literally experiences it.

The metaphorical readings of Dana's disability do make sense, but the materiality of her amputation refuses to be denied and a black feminist disability studies reading of the novel must acknowledge both valences. The materiality of disability is further emphasized by the fact that the novel does not end with the moment of Dana's disablement, but rather continues into the brief but potent epilogue. In this final portion of the novel, "as soon as [her] arm was well enough," Dana and Kevin travel to Maryland to locate where the Weylin plantation had been (262). In the countryside, they find that Rufus's house is gone and the farmer living on the land has never heard of the Weylins. Nothing physical remains except a few old newspapers that indicate Rufus died in an accidental house fire. After his death, all the slaves were sold, though several slaves, including Dana's ancestor Hagar, do not appear in the sale list. After their search for information finds nothing more than these few details, Kevin tells Dana she will likely never know what happened to everyone. In response, Dana touches first the scar on her face from where Rufus's father once kicked her and then her empty sleeve. Here we are reminded of Dana's *disabilities* via her touching both the place where her arm once was and her scarred face, which can be read as a stand-in for her scarred back. When Dana speaks after this moment of physical ritual remembrance, she questions why she wanted to come back in the first place, to which Kevin replies, "To try to understand. To touch solid evidence that those people existed. To reassure yourself that you're sane" (264).

On the one hand, this final scene refuses to answer any questions, leaving not only Dana and Kevin, but also readers to wonder what happened in the past and what will happen now. On the other hand, this scene also depicts Dana as a disabled woman continuing her life. This is important for two reasons. First, it is important that the book does not end with disablement and pain, with the only representations of Dana's disabled bodymind as bloody and screaming after injury or confused and aching in the hospital. The novel represents Dana in the end as healed and disabled at the same time. Her bodymind is different, yes; it has clearly been impacted by her experience of slavery. Nevertheless, Dana continues on past the moment of disablement and, as Henton claims, "can again live as a normal, non-time travel-



ing woman,” a normal, *disabled*, non-time-traveling woman that is (108). Second, this ending is important for the neo–slave narrative genre. As previously stated, neo–slave narratives are supposed to be able to represent what could not be included in traditional slave narratives. Traditional slave narrative authors needed to represent themselves as normatively as possible, making moral and rational pleas for the sympathy of the reader. As the narrator of a neo–slave narrative, Dana is allowed to be a disabled woman whose disability is readily, yet nonspectacularly displayed. Dana’s amputated arm has clearly impacted her, but her disablement is not mourned in the text as emblematic of the horrors of slavery, as many critics have argued; rather, Dana seems most impacted by her inability to recover historical evidence of her experience and the experiences of her ancestors. As Pickens writes, “The book simply ends. Its denouement is neither tragic nor triumphant” (“Octavia Butler and the Aesthetics of the Novel” 175). If anything, the epilogue seems to be a critique of history and the paucity of the archive when it comes to finding the voices and experiences of marginalized people.

While the epilogue is only a brief explicit representation of disability compared to the sustained impending possibility of disability that operates throughout the majority of the novel, this final portion of the text further demonstrates how disability is integral to the structure of *Kindred*. From the prologue, which sets up disability as inevitable; to Dana’s time travel compelled by the possibility of disability; to the moment of Dana’s disablement, which brings the prologue to fruition; to the epilogue, which represents Dana as a disabled woman looking for answers to her traumatic and painful experience, disability is a consistent and guiding aspect of the book. Disability is not a metaphor for Dana; it is part of her embodied existence, and yet the (im)materiality of her missing limb is intimately tied to and thus a symbol of her particular experience of slavery.

Disability even plays a prominent role in Dana’s last words in the book. She states, “If we told anyone else about this, anyone at all, they wouldn’t think we were so sane” (264). Here Dana acknowledges the nonrealist nature of her experience and how claims to sanity or able-mindedness in contemporary culture are dependent on rationally explained experiences understood as real—a topic that I will discuss at length in the next chapter. Disability studies scholars argue our culture tends to narrativize disability, wanting a story and explanation for nonnormative bodyminds.<sup>28</sup> This urge to narrativize disability is encapsulated in the common ableist question

“What happened to you?” In *Kindred*, as noted earlier, the before and after temporality typically assumed of disability cannot be adequately applied. In her present context, Dana’s disability cannot have a story attached, at least not a temporally linear, culturally recognizable, and rationally acceptable story. Here, just as disability structures the novel as a whole, disability or, more precisely, ableism structures what Dana can and cannot say about her experience.

From start to finish, literally from Dana’s first sentence to her last, disability structures *Kindred*. Disability in the text is at once a metaphor for racial oppression *and* a reference to or reflection of the material prevalence of disability for black people during the antebellum period. This simultaneity of representational modes is essential to the novel’s impact as a neo–slave narrative. *Kindred* relies on both metaphor and materiality to connect the past and the present, to reveal what could not previously be revealed in traditional slave narratives, and to demonstrate how these historically lost elements are essential for understanding the legacy of slavery today.

## Conclusion

In response to both disability studies scholars who criticize the use of disability as a metaphor and black feminist and other critics who almost exclusively interpret disability as a metaphor for other oppressions and thematic concerns, I have demonstrated how a contextualized and historicized perspective allows critics to trace both the metaphorical and material uses of disability. This approach to disability metaphors requires being particularly attentive to the relationships of disability to racial, gendered, economic, and sexual violence, such as that which occurred in American slavery. Although disability studies scholars have been rightfully critical of how disability is often interpreted as a metaphor for trauma or other oppressions, we cannot dismiss outright all metaphorical uses of disability, especially when these metaphors are connected to or blended with material issues of disability and impairment, either in the text itself or in the referent of the metaphor—in this case, slavery. In *Kindred*, disability is not exclusively metaphorical, despite previous critical readings to the contrary. Dana is literally disabled by her experience with the physical, emotional, sexual, and discursive violence of slavery, and disability haunts and propels the novel throughout. As a result, we must read this representation of disability for both metaphorical and material meanings. I intend for my approach to

reading disability as metaphor and materiality to be useful and applicable not only in regard to black women's speculative fiction, but also with respect to any representation of disability in texts produced by or focused on people of color, women, gender-nonconforming people, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-, and queer people, who each have histories of discourses of (dis)ability being used to justify their oppression.

The discussion of the relationship of disability and slavery in this chapter also demonstrates the neo-slave narrative's ability to represent what was previously unable to be represented within the specific historical and pragmatic context of the traditional slave narrative. Disability is one of the major things neo-slave narratives can represent that traditional slave narratives could not. In particular, the metaphorical and material representations of disability that appear in *Kindred* and other neo-slave narratives are made possible by the context of speculative fiction. Mark Bould argues that "critical treatments of the neo-slave narrative have typically neglected the significant use made of fantastic devices so as to trouble and confront the history of slavery in the New World (which includes its ongoing legacies)" (183). The use of speculative fictional devices is integral to the representation of disability in *Kindred*. Only nonrealist representations can create the circumstances in which slavery has a real, direct bodily impact on contemporary individuals. In the twenty-first century, there are no survivors of slavery remaining to speak about their experiences, and thus, as Long contends, "experiential and bodily connection to slavery has been lost. No one alive bears the physical scars of African American enslavement" (460). Speculative fictional neo-slave narratives can intervene in this lost connection, using nonrealist narrative devices such as time travel to make what was once a reality real again, to, as Dubey writes, "rupture narrative realism in order to offer an immediate bodily experience of the trauma of slavery" ("Speculative Fictions of Slavery" 788). Through a historicized approach that incorporates disability studies and black feminist theories, representations of racialized and gendered (dis)ability can be understood in their metaphorical and material intersectional complexity. In the next chapter, I continue to read disability as metaphor and material experience in another neo-slave narrative, Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*. There I extend this chapter's arguments on the importance of disability to the neo-slave narrative genre's goal of exploring the lingering effects of slavery, this time in connection with the social construction of able-mindedness.