

DEFAMILIARIZING (DIS)ABILITY, RACE, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY

Science fiction/fantasy/horror can do that kind of disorientating shifting with anything: politics, culture, race, power, sex, sexuality, gender. That's the stuff I find interesting. It's in the nature of the genre to allow one to step outside the box and examine what's in it and think about what might be excluded and why. Any literature can do that; it's just a particular hallmark of fantastical literature. — NALO HOPKINSON (quoted in Simpson)

Speculative fiction can add significantly to the continuum of meaning. By inventing alternate or futuristic worlds, such stories can suggest other ways of organizing societies—ways we have never tried—other modes in which families, religions, division of labor, and political structures can function. It does not matter if some of these imagined alternatives might still be impossible in our own world, or if they might *always* be impossible because of the circumstances of the invented world are too different from our own. These stories still make us think, make us question, make us wonder what is, and what is not, changeable. — MARIE JAKOBER, “The Continuum of Meaning”

From *Harry Potter* to the *Twilight* series, novels and films of the fantasy genre have gained incredible mainstream popularity in recent years. This area of speculative fiction is often considered nonliterary, mainstream fluff; silly escapist texts marketed toward youth, though consumed by many

adults. Scholarship in popular culture and genre studies has demonstrated that such a dismissive approach to the mainstream obscures the cultural work being performed by these texts that are intimately connected to widespread social understandings of (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality. Currently, black feminist and disability studies scholarship on popular culture is dominated by studies of film and television (and, for black feminists, studies of music). Less attention has been paid to mainstream genre fiction, yet, as Belinda Edmondson argues in regard to black literature in particular, “the boundaries between the conventions of popular and serious black literature have always been permeable, perhaps more now than ever; to the point where the distinctions are, while still useful, not always the most salient” (193). The existing scholarship on genre fiction tends to focus more on gender and sexuality—such as feminist readings of romance narratives—with moderate attention to race and almost no attention to (dis)ability.¹ Black feminist and disability studies scholars who give this genre serious and nuanced attention are likely to find much to explore, critique, and value in mainstream genre fiction.

In this chapter I introduce the concept of defamiliarization as a major nonrealist method through which black women’s speculative fiction reimagines the possibilities and meanings of the categories of (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality and thereby change the rules of interpretation and analysis. *Defamiliarization* is a term used by many scholars of science fiction and speculative fiction. It is a translation of the Russian Formalist word *ostranenie*.² Defamiliarization is related to Darko Suvin’s more genre-specific term *cognitive estrangement*, which refers to the way science fiction estranges or distances readers from their knowledge and assumptions about what constitutes reality in order to move them to question those very assumptions (3–15).³ I use *defamiliarization* to refer to the way speculative fiction texts make the familiar social concepts of (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality unfamiliar in order to encourage readers to question the meanings and boundaries of these categories.

Defamiliarization doesn’t occur in any single fashion; rather, this term refers to the many ways that an author can make a familiar thing seem strange or different so that this familiar thing moves from mundane and predictable to surprising, interesting, and thought-provoking. My focus here is on the defamiliarization of (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality specifically, but these are far from the only things that speculative fiction can defamiliarize. As Nalo Hopkinson asserts, “Speculative fiction is a great place to warp

the mirror, and thus impel the reader to view differently things that they've taken for granted" (Glave and Hopkinson 149). The texts in this chapter use nonhuman bodyminds and nonrealist worlds to defamiliarize social categories, thereby demonstrating how the meaning and experience of (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality vary based on individual bodyminds as well as social and environmental contexts. The defamiliarization of (dis)ability is particularly important because the typical representation of disability is too easily abstracted into a metaphor for issues of loss, damage, or evil or made too solid and steady as an easily knowable and recognizable medical/biological fact of the bodymind. What speculative fiction does for the representation of disability is work between these polarities and, in the process, require the reader to do some imaginative labor as well. By pushing readers to read and understand (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality differently through defamiliarization, black women's speculative fiction allows for new understandings and experiences of these categories to emerge.

Due to the nonhuman nature of the main characters in the texts discussed in this chapter, I theorize defamiliarization in speculative fiction here under the influence of what Julie Livingston and Jasbir K. Puar refer to as *interspecies*.⁴ Working in critical tension with animal studies, Livingston and Puar suggest that the term *interspecies* "offers a broader geopolitical understanding of how the human/animal/plant triad is unstable and varies across time and space," revealing how "what counts as 'human' is always under contestation" (5, 6). According to Livingston and Puar, this interspecies contestation of the category of the human in various areas of knowledge production reveals the biopolitical anthropomorphism of such productions that prioritizes not just humans, but *particular* humans within analyses, using animals and plants as "racial and sexual proxies" (4). While I doubt Livingston and Puar intended *interspecies* to refer to werewolves, demons, and half-mortals, the term is useful as a guiding concept when considering defamiliarization in speculative fiction.

An interspecies framework insists that what counts as human is always under contestation, while defamiliarization in speculative fiction challenges not only what is recognizable as human, but also what is recognizable as belonging within the human-based categories of (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality. Similar to how animal studies and feminist science studies scholars, such as Anne Fausto-Sterling, question the applicability of human definitions of sex, gender, and sexuality to animal behaviors, I contend that through defamiliarization, the representation of (dis)ability, race,

gender, and sexuality in speculative fictional texts with nonhuman beings reveals the very contestable nature of these categories, which are based on certain types of human beings in certain types of social contexts (Fausto-Sterling 183–86, 95–232). Understanding (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality designations as human social constructions helps in elucidating how these fantasy texts with nonhuman characters emphasize the unstable nature of not only what it means to be recognizably human, but also what it means to be recognizably disabled, black, woman, and so on. To demonstrate these points about defamiliarization I discuss three examples of black women's fantasy fiction: N. K. Jemisin's *The Broken Kingdoms*, Shawntelle Madison's *Coveted* series, and Nalo Hopkinson's *Sister Mine*. These texts, with their nonhuman characters and fantastical settings, challenge readers' assumptions about and understandings of (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality through the defamiliarization of these categories.

Jemisin's *The Broken Kingdoms*, the second book in her *Inheritance* trilogy, was published in 2010. As a whole, the *Inheritance* trilogy follows the development of a non-Earth world created by three gods and populated by mortals, godlings (the immortal children of the gods), and demons. In this world, magic is real, created and used by gods and godlings, but also able to be tapped into by demons and talented mortals. The overall plot of the series follows the changes in and battles for power among the three gods and the resulting impact on the mortal realm. Each novel in the series occurs in a different time period with a different central narrating character. While some god and godling characters appear throughout the series, most mortal characters only appear in a single text. The narrator of *The Broken Kingdoms* is Oree Shoth, a blind woman artist who can see magic as well as utilize it in her art—though Oree does not understand or know how to control the magic until later in the text. Readers eventually learn that Oree can see magic because she is a demon, the progeny of mortal and god/godling mixing. Prior to this revelation, Oree is simply a young, blind woman artist who ends up in the middle of a mortal and demon plot to kill godlings and overthrow the gods. The main plot of *The Broken Kingdoms* follows Oree's story as it fits within the overall series' coverage of the battle for power in this magical world.

Madison's *Coveted* series includes two prequel novellas, *Collected* and *Bitter Disenchantment*, the titular novel *Coveted*, the sequels *Kept* and *Compelled*, and a short story collection, *Cursed*, which contains stories set both before and after the events of the main series.⁵ Published between 2012 and

2016, the *Coveted* series focuses on Natalya Stravinsky, a female werewolf with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) living in New Jersey. Natalya's disability manifests through her attention to detail and order, her dislike of dirt and germs, and her extensive hoarding of holiday collectables. Readers learn that due to her disability Natalya has been exiled from her local werewolf pack. This ousting from the pack is hurtful to her on multiple levels. Not only is the exile embarrassing for Natalya and her family, but it also means a lack of community connection and protection for Natalya; other werewolves look down on her and treat her poorly. The pack exile is made worse by the fact that Natalya was formerly romantically involved with the pack leader's son, Thorn, and their relationship remains complicated throughout most of the series. Each of the texts that focus on Natalya's story includes the development of three interrelated plots central to the series: Natalya's role in the pack, her management of her disability, and her relationship with Thorn. Additionally, each text deals with a different immediate challenge such as the kidnappings of Natalya's brother and father and attacks from enemy werewolves and other nonhuman beings.

Finally, Hopkinson's *Sister Mine*, published in 2013, is set in a contemporary, fantastical Toronto, Canada. In this setting, immortal deities of Caribbean and African influence not only help regulate things such as death and the environment in the mortal world, but they also take on mortal bodies and occasionally mate with mortals as well. One pair of children from such immortal/mortal mixing is Makeda and Abby, formerly conjoined twin sisters. When the sisters were separated shortly after their birth, only Abby retained "mojo," the magic abilities of immortals. In addition, both women have disabilities—Abby has a shortened leg and Makeda has seizures. *Sister Mine* follows narrator Makeda as she tries to become more independent from her sister, but is forced back into relationship with Abby when their elderly father goes missing. In attempting to find her father with Abby, Makeda discovers long-kept family secrets and learns about herself in the process.

In this chapter I first detail how these example texts defamiliarize (dis)ability through nonhuman bodyminds and fantastical environments and social contexts. In the second section, I demonstrate how these texts also defamiliarize race, gender, and sexuality. Throughout, I emphasize the importance of defamiliarization to how black women's speculative fiction changes the rules of reality and the rules of interpretation and analysis, concluding with a reflection on the theoretical and political value of studying mainstream genre fiction.

Making Familiar Disabilities Unfamiliar

When reading fantastical representations of (dis)ability, the line and connections between ability and disability become, at times, quite blurred. Speculative fiction can challenge assumptions about the definitions of and boundaries between disability and ability through defamiliarization. In particular, *The Broken Kingdoms*, the *Coveted* series, and *Sister Mine* defamiliarize realist disabilities—that is, disabilities we recognize from our current reality—through the nonrealist bodyminds of demons, werewolves, and half-mortals and their fantastical physical and social environments. Unlike previous chapters where speculative fiction novels have depicted nonrealist disabilities, such as multiple consciousnesses and hyperempathy, the texts in this chapter represent OCD, blindness, conjoined twins, and other realist disabilities in highly nonrealist settings. While this is a different representational approach to (dis)ability in speculative fiction, these authors' representation of realist disabilities in fantasy texts with nonhuman characters have a similar effect in that they too refuse to adhere to readers' expectations about disability.

In the last chapter, I explained how the representation of a nonrealist disability in the *Parable* books refuses to give readers the opportunity to use any preformed cultural knowledge, assumptions, or stereotypes to understand Lauren's disability because hyperempathy does not exist in our reality. In the case of the work of Jemisin, Madison, and Hopkinson here, blindness, OCD, and conjoinment are realist disabilities. Readers recognize these disabilities and therefore are inclined to read through the lens of previous cultural knowledge and assumptions about what these disabilities entail. For example, OCD is marked by what Lennard Davis calls a "sociology of disease recognition" in which "the stream of information about the disease entity swirls through the media, self-help books, memoirs, and word of mouth so that a recognizable symptom pool develops. Individuals, family, and friends can 'know' these symptoms," recognize them in themselves or others, and then informally diagnose by placing "the simplified and streamlined disease entity within a confident and knowing treatment regimen" (*Obsession* 219, 29). In the case of OCD, various fictional and nonfictional media representations have resulted in a culturally recognizable version of this disability that includes particular verbal and behavioral cues such as ritualized and repeated hand-washing or frequent attention to organization or schedule.⁶ Blindness has similarly been overdetermined in fiction, film, and television as an experience of total darkness in which other senses become supernat-

urally attuned.⁷ Representations of conjoined twins, though less common than OCD and blindness, tend to be more spectacular, engaging in discourses of enfreakment and the supercrip.⁸ The nonhuman bodyminds and nonrealist worlds of the texts, however, make these realist disabilities less clearly knowable or predictable than expected, thus defamiliarizing them.

By representing realist disabilities in nonrealist contexts, these fantasy texts push readers to understand disability from the perspective of the main character, not from our preconceived notions and stereotypes. While representations of nonrealist disabilities reject the possibility of applying preconceived notions about disability entirely, representations of realist disabilities in nonrealist and nonhuman contexts play with reader expectations and twist them. The defamiliarization of realist disabilities in these fantasy texts challenges readers' assumptions about the meanings, manifestations, and effects of a particular disability on physical, mental, social, and environmental levels alike, forcing readers to reconsider what they know or think they know about what it means to be disabled. This challenge to reader assumptions about what it means to be disabled is a key part of the important political potential of these texts. In each example text below I will discuss how the work defamiliarizes realist disabilities first through nonhuman bodyminds and second through their fantastical nonrealist environments and social contexts. As a result of defamiliarization in these texts, readers must come to understand blindness, OCD, and conjoined twins differently than they might imagine such disabilities for a character in a realist text.

In *The Broken Kingdoms*, Oree is blind, yet she can see magic because she is a demon. This means that she can see gods and godlings who embody magic, and she can also see words written or spoken in the gods' magical language, whether the words are used by gods, godlings, or mortals. Oree's demon bodymind defamiliarizes blindness by making her experience distinctly different from supposedly realist representations of blindness, which often focus on total darkness and the enhancement of other senses (often to nonrealist, hyperbolic degrees). While Oree does often lavishly describe things in nonvisual terms, she also uses color and shapes to describe the things she feels, smells, sees, or senses around her. Often, sense-based terms are blurred in Oree's narration, but it is never stated that this blurring is specifically due to her disability. For example, when speaking of the color of her godling lover Madding's eyes, she refers to it as that which "I would never be able to fully describe, even if I someday learn the words. The best I can do is compare it to things I do know: the heavy thickness of red gold, the smell

of brass on a hot day, desire and pride” (*The Broken Kingdoms* 16). Here it is unclear if this indescribable color is hard for Oree to explain because of her blindness or because Madding is a magical godling (another nonhuman bodymind) who may truly have eyes which mortal language cannot describe in purely visual terms. Oree’s demon bodymind disallows readers the ability to overlay typical realist assumptions about what blindness does or does not entail—a key aspect of the defamiliarization of disability.

The Broken Kingdom further defamiliarizes (dis)ability in the text by emphasizing how Oree’s experience of the world changes dramatically based on her environment. While discussion of the social construction of disability is ever-present in disability studies, *The Broken Kingdoms* demonstrates how ability is also context-dependent by making Oree’s ability to see magic contingent on being in places where magic exists, such as in the city of Shadow. In other nonmagical spaces, such as the town where she grew up, there is no magic to see at all. There, Oree is blind without any magic to help navigate the space. The mediating presence of magic in Oree’s experience of her blindness is most apparent when she visits the magical floating castle called Sky where she can see almost everything. Oree explains, “All my life I had heard arcane terms like *depth perception* and *panorama*, yet never fully understood. Now I felt like a seeing person—or how I had always imagined they must feel. I could see *everything*, except for the man-shaped shadow that was Hado at my side and the occasional shadows of other people passing by, most of them briskly and not speaking. I stared at them shamelessly, even when the shadows turned their heads to stare back” (297; original emphasis). This quote’s depiction of amazement demonstrates the particularity of this space for Oree, allowing for a representation of seeing not after a cure or other alterations to the bodymind, but rather through a change in context to a particularly magic-filled location. The representation of how Oree’s experiences of sight vary by location also reflects realist issues in contesting other representations of blindness that portray this disability as a monolithic experience of darkness rather than as a spectrum of experiences in which quality and types of vision vary widely. By making Oree’s ability to see magic environmentally contextual, Jemisin defamiliarizes disability *and* ability, making them both contingent on a variety of physical, mental, social, and environmental factors. Oree’s experience of blindness is neither predictable nor stereotypical, requiring readers to resist their preconceived notions and understand Oree’s disability within its nonhuman and fantasy contexts.

Madison's *Coveted* series defamiliarizes a realist disability by centering on a main character with OCD, whose werewolf bodymind dramatically impacts her experience of this disability. In the prequel novella, *Collected*, there is no mention of Natalya using any sort of pharmaceutical treatment for her disability. In the first full novel, *Coveted*, however, Natalya specifically mentions how she previously used prescription drugs to help control her behaviors and impulses, but that this method did not work. She states that due to her fast werewolf metabolism, medications hit her too quickly, causing strange, werewolf-specific side effects. When her best friend, Aggie, suggests Natalya take a pill before her first date since breaking up with Thorn, Natalya says that "the side effects don't agree with the wolf," causing her to shake "wildly as the wolf tried to escape the calm the pills forced on [her] body" (*Coveted* 59). Later in the book, when Natalya's brother Alex is kidnapped and she is not allowed to help with the hunt to find him, she repeats that drugs are not a good solution for managing her disability as a werewolf. She states, "I didn't want to escape into the haze of my medications. I didn't want all those side effects the wolf hated. Who in their right mind would want to have fits or experience strange random patches of fur?" (160). From the perspective of the first two texts then, the *Coveted* series makes OCD, or at least the management of this disability, unfamiliar by making pharmaceutical intervention a physical impossibility for Natalya.

While readers may recognize the realist cues for OCD in Natalya's behavior, the early texts in the series align with the disability rights assertion that medication need not be the first or primary method for living well with a disability, particularly a mental disability. Although *Coveted* and *Collected* do not approach this topic directly by having Natalya outright reject pharmaceutical intervention—Natalya does take half a pill before her date—Madison's series nonetheless uses the speculative fictional context of a werewolf's nonhuman bodymind to gesture toward two realist issues of the medical-industrial complex. First, Natalya's difficulty with medication illustrates how, for some people, the effects of medication may be far worse than any symptoms of their disability and only nonpharmaceutical treatments (if any at all) are acceptable. This is initially implied to be the case for Natalya in *Coveted* when she chooses to go to therapy with Dr. Frank, a wizard psychologist who places her in a cognitive-behavioral therapy group with other supernatural beings with mental disabilities. Second, Natalya's negative reaction as a werewolf to taking human medication gestures toward concerns with how pharmaceuticals are developed in the first place.

Natalya's experience of werewolf side effects from medication made for and by humans draws attention to how pharmaceuticals are created and tested on the basis of certain beings and yet dispensed under the assumption that they will work for all or most bodyminds.

The defamiliarization of disability through Natalya's relationship to pharmaceutical treatment becomes even more complicated in the third and fourth books in the series, *Kept* and *Compelled*, in which there is an important and unexplained shift.⁹ In *Kept*, Natalya is represented multiple times taking medication for her obsessive-compulsive behaviors with apparently no fits, patches of fur, or any of the other side effects mentioned in *Coveted*. This change is not explicitly accounted for and seems to have only a minor impact on the narrative. In *Compelled*, Natalya impulsively travels to Russia in an attempt to find a magical cure for Thorn, whose lifespan was shortened by a wizard. Due to the unplanned nature of the trip, she forgets her self-proclaimed "happy pills" back in the United States; so although she mentions wishing she had them, she is not actually represented taking medication during the majority of the novel (92). Readers are not given any explicit explanation as to why Natalya is suddenly, in books set less than a year after the end of *Coveted*, able to take medication without any of the complications or side effects previously mentioned in the series. This shift in Natalya's relationship to pharmaceutical treatment further defamiliarizes disability because the change keeps the reader from believing, after two books, that they fully know and understand Natalya's experience of OCD. Defamiliarization here highlights the changing nature of disability in a character's life, not just in the typically discussed movement from non-disabled to disabled, but also the change within one's relationship to disability as a category of experience and identity.

From a disability studies perspective, we can also read the shift in the use of pharmaceuticals and the narrative silence around this change as purposeful on the part of Natalya as a narrator. It is possible that she found a medication that works for her and feels no need to explain her choice in managing her disability to the reader. Reading Natalya's silence regarding her use of medication as strategic is generative from a disability studies standpoint because it connects with realist issues in the field. While the disability rights movement rejects forced treatment, its members and allies simultaneously recognize that some people with disabilities might choose to use some forms of pharmaceutical treatment nonetheless. This choice is understandable, yet ought to be one of many options made available, finan-

cially and socially. There is one moment in *Compelled* which particularly opens the series up to such an interpretation. As Natalya socializes among a new group of werewolves in Russia, she states to the reader, “My medication, which I hadn’t taken since I’d left home, only did so much. I’d never be normal, and, in a way, I’d come to accept that. It was making others accept it that was far more difficult” (197). Here Natalya reveals that her medication has a limited impact on the manifestations of her OCD, and although she does not seem to have the negative werewolf-specific side effects discussed in *Coveted*, she also is not suddenly cured or completely normalized by her use of pharmaceutical treatment. Instead, she asserts that she has accepted herself as being outside of the norm—even with medication—and that it is others’ inability to accept her and her disability that represents the larger concern.

In addition to defamiliarizing OCD through Natalya’s werewolf bodymind, the *Coveted* series also defamiliarizes Natalya’s disability at the social level. In a realist context, OCD is generally understood as a nonapparent mental disability that is not visually marked on the bodymind or via disability accoutrements such as a wheelchair, hearing aid, or cane. Through the proliferation of representations of OCD, however, this disability has become more recognizable or, as Margaret Price might phrase it, “intermittently apparent” and familiar to the general public, despite its lack of perpetually visible bodymind markers or accoutrements (“The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain” 272). In the *Coveted* series, Natalya performs many of the expected indicators of OCD, allowing most contemporary readers to easily recognize her disability. Understanding OCD as an intermittently apparent mental disability, from a realist perspective, one would assume that when Natalya is not engaging in these recognizable behaviors she would appear nondisabled to those around her. This is not the case, however, in the context of her werewolf social environment. In the series, Natalya is said to *smell* inferior to other werewolves due to her constant nervousness and heightened anxiety. She states, “My inferior scent was the one thing I couldn’t scrub off. Worry, doubt, and fear clung to me and alienated me from others” (*Kept* 44). Although this scent does not directly indicate OCD or even necessarily disability to other werewolves, it nonetheless marks her as a nonnormative, low-ranking werewolf. This scent is part of the reason why Natalya is exiled from her pack and mistreated by other werewolves in the community. The *Coveted* series’s werewolf social context then constitutes a representational shift in which an

otherwise intermittently apparent disability is defamiliarized into a readily and regularly apparent disability.

I use *nonapparent*, *intermittently apparent*, and *apparent* here rather than *visible* and *invisible* for several reasons. First and foremost I use these terms because they are increasingly becoming the preferred terms within disability rights and disability studies communities.¹⁰ Terms of apparency move away from the ocular-centric nature of visibility and shift the onus for noticing or not noticing disability onto the perceiving person rather than onto the visibility of disability via a person's bodymind, accoutrements, or behaviors. Apparency is particularly appropriate to use in this context because for Natalya her disability is not made visible through sight, but is apparent through scent. Here OCD, typically defined as a mental disability, has important physical components for Natalya. Werewolves prioritize scent for understanding the world because of their heightened sense of smell, which remains active even while they are in human form. The emphasis on scent as a means of reading Natalya as disabled, therefore, draws attention to the limits of the human "fantasy of identification," to borrow from Ellen Samuels, which positions disability as a static category that can be easily identified, particularly through visual means (*Fantasies of Identification*). As a result of this defamiliarization of OCD, which makes it readily apparent to other werewolves, Natalya's disability becomes more actively present in her social interactions than her OCD might otherwise have been in a realist context. As a result, once again, what readers already know or expect about a realist disability is made less predictable through fantastical settings, here the social and bodymind context of a community of werewolves.

Finally, Hopkinson's *Sister Mine* defamiliarizes disability through the non-human bodyminds of half-mortal, half-celestial sisters Makeda and Abby and their experiences in the mortal versus celestial realms, two very different environmental contexts. Toward the beginning of the novel, Makeda states that she and Abby "could have lived as we were, conjoined. Between us, we had what we needed," but instead the conjoined twins were separated as infants (Hopkinson 29). The novel first, therefore, defamiliarizes the normative assumption that separation is the best and most ideal route for conjoined twins. This defamiliarization of this common perception of conjoined twins is achieved through both Makeda's insistence on their ability to live conjoined and by the fact that the women are not nondisabled after the separation surgery. Rather, they are still both disabled, just dif-

ferently disabled than they were when conjoined. Though they now have separate bodies, the separation surgery left Abby with scoliosis and a shortened leg, which requires her to use crutches or a cane for mobility, and left Makeda with a liver problem that requires regular medication and occasionally causes seizures severe enough that she does not drive. The notion that separation surgery will allow conjoined twins to live “normal”—meaning nondisabled—lives is thereby questioned in the novel.

The defamiliarization of conjoined twins is further articulated through Makeda’s affinity for representations of conjoined twins. She collects images, texts, and memorabilia representing Chang and Eng, Millie and Christine, and other conjoined twins from various places and historical periods, signaling an identification with these people and even a desire for the particular disability she lost through separation. This desire for and identification with conjoinment defamiliarizes (dis)ability because it inverts the trope of disability as loss and instead represents the separation surgery’s attempt to “cure” disability as loss for Makeda. Her identification with conjoined twins is made most clear in Makeda’s conversation with love interest, Brie, as she shows him her collection. When he asks, “You got a thing for freaks?,” Makeda gets upset and asks him to leave (148). When Brie asks what he said wrong, Makeda compares his question to a white person saying “nigger,” insisting that it’s okay for black people to use such a term, but not white people. Not quite understanding, Brie says, “Oh. I’m sorry. But it’s not like I said it to anyone’s face,” to which Makeda replies, “You said it to me,” revealing her formerly conjoined status (148). Here Makeda’s identification with “freak” as a disability community insider term reflects her disability identity even as the disability she most strongly identifies with is no longer apparent on her bodymind. This moment also underscores the importance of understanding (dis)ability, race, and gender to simultaneously operate as social constructs, systems of privilege and oppression, discourses, experiences, and identities. While Makeda is no longer conjoined and in fact cannot even remember when she was conjoined, she still strongly identifies with that particular disability experience.

Similar to Natalya’s sudden change in use of medication, however, less than halfway through the text Makeda learns the truth about her and Abby’s birth and separation surgery, resulting in a new defamiliarization of her disability. What seemed to be a realist disability is shifted to a new combination of realist and nonrealist. Makeda shares with the reader what her uncle tells her:

Abby had been fine when we were born. Only that shorter leg. Whereas I was all but an empty shell. A living body with a near-inert mind, and a tiny undifferentiated nubbin of aetheric where there should have been the psychic organelle of mojo that all living creatures possess to one degree or another. Whereas Abby's has been working a-okay. And it was Abby's blood and breath that had been sustaining me in the womb. . . . Dad's kin cut me away from Abby in order to keep her alive. They sliced me off my precious sister, neatly as paring a hangnail, and left me in my crib to die. (Hopkinson 114–15)

Abby and Makeda's mortal mother begged for their father to save Makeda's life and he did so by confining himself to a mortal body and giving Makeda his mojo (the magical abilities of celestials), which provided her the ability to live, grow, and develop, but also resulted in her occasional seizures. Here the text again subverts a realist linear teleology of (dis)ability in which one moves from nondisabled to disabled and supposedly forever desires to "return" to a nondisabled state. As Makeda's celestial uncle tells her, "Time's not linear, no matter what your senses tell you" (265). Makeda was born severely disabled, then she was provided her father's mojo to become differently disabled (with seizures and no mojo of her own to work with). Now with her father's mortal body's death impending, she is presented with the possibility of her own death or reversion to the disabled bodymind with which she was born, which is a differently disabled bodymind than she thought she had been born with and with which she had previously identified and desired through her conjoined twin memorabilia collection. There is no linear progress of disability and loss to be cleanly traced here.

The defamiliarization of (dis)ability in *Sister Mine* is also highly dependent on environmental context. Abby and Makeda's experiences of their bodyminds as disabled or nondisabled or something shifting in between varies dramatically depending on whether they are in the mortal or celestial realm, referred to as "palais space" in the novel. As the above quotations about Abby and Makeda's separation surgery suggest, Abby was born with mojo while Makeda had hardly any at all. The differences in the sisters' mojo and bodyminds makes Makeda primarily disabled within the context of the celestial world and Abby primarily disabled within the context of the mortal world. Like blindness and OCD in *The Broken Kingdoms* and the *Coveted* series, therefore, (dis)ability in *Sister Mine* is represented as both contextual and relational.

At the start of the novel Makeda half-jokingly refers to herself as “a crippled deity half-breed” because in the context of her celestial, immortal family, her lack of *mojo* is read as an impairment (2). Her deity relatives look down on her, and her lack of *mojo* makes visiting and operating in the palais space of the immortal realm difficult for her. In contrast, Abby, who uses crutches or a cane in the mortal realm, “could move quicker than thought” in palais space and is comfortable, accepted, and valued among their celestial relatives (98–99). In the immortal world then Makeda is marked by a nonrealist disability (lack of *mojo*), and Abby is essentially nondisabled, whereas in the mortal realm Abby’s disability is far more apparent and prominent than Makeda’s seizure condition. In particular, stress due to the situation with their missing father is represented as decreasing Abby’s mobility in the mortal realm. However, she is still depicted as a fierce disabled woman who, at one point in the text, curses the “bastard [who] took the last disabled space” without a disabled parking license plate or hangtag and then shatters the person’s brake light with her crutch (79–80). In speculative fiction, it is possible to move between varying states of ability and disability due to changes in bodyminds and/or spaces. While those in disability studies would say that we all vary in our abilities over time and people with chronic illnesses particularly demonstrate in realist contexts how one’s relationship to (dis)ability can move in multidirectional, nonlinear ways, speculative fiction can depict such movement in ways that possibly prevent individual blame/shame and resist the necessity of medical/psychological explanations by placing individual oscillation of (dis)ability in nonrealist, nonhuman contexts. Such defamiliarization of (dis)ability discourages readers from applying their realist assumptions and prejudices to these representations as they might, for example, to a memoir of chronic pain.

In *The Broken Kingdoms*, the *Coveted* series, and *Sister Mine*, the realist disabilities of blindness, OCD, and conjoinment are central material aspects of the main characters’ lives. However, the characters’ nonhuman bodyminds and fantastical environmental and social contexts make understanding the physical, mental, and social manifestations of disability—as well as the impact of potential treatment or cure of disability in the *Coveted* series and *Sister Mine*—not an easily knowable and recognizable process. Due to defamiliarization, readers cannot apply realist expectations to werewolf, demon, and half-mortal bodyminds or their fantasy worlds. Instead, readers must do the imaginative labor of understanding and following the development of these characters and their disabilities from within the bodymind,

environmental, and social contexts created in each text. This particularly distinguishes speculative fiction of the fantasy genre from speculative fiction of the science fiction genre. The latter tends to rely on the “hard” sciences to explain nonrealist aspects of a text; even if the speculative fictional science is nonexistent in our current reality, it tends to be based on realist scientific theories and experiments.¹¹ Such works rely on intellectual or rationalist explanations, whereas speculative fiction in the fantasy genre can create magical and nonhuman rationales for events which cannot and do not need to be explained otherwise. This difference makes speculative fiction with fantastical contexts well positioned to imagine (dis)ability outside the context of medical, biological, and other scientific explanations. In addition to the defamiliarization of (dis)ability, *Sister Mine*, the *Coveted* series, and *The Broken Kingdoms* also defamiliarize other prominent systems of privilege and oppression. By defamiliarizing multiple social categories in nonhuman contexts, these texts reveal the ways (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality are all unstable, mutually constitutive human social constructions.

Defamiliarization of Race, Gender, and Sexuality

The use of defamiliarization in black women’s speculative fiction is not limited to (dis)ability alone. The additional defamiliarization of race, gender, and sexuality in these texts reveals how this speculative-fictional method of representation is integral to the texts’ social critiques. The collective defamiliarization of multiple social categories emphasizes that (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality are distinctly human, socially constructed concepts that rely on particular notions of bodyminds, senses, behaviors, and abilities, often in mutually constitutive or intersecting ways. Defamiliarization is therefore a key nonrealist technique through which black women’s speculative fiction reimagines bodyminds in ways that change the rules of interpretation and analysis, emphasizing the importance of the contexts in which categories of (dis)ability, race, and gender exist.

Race in *The Broken Kingdoms* is defamiliarized through the relative absence of realist racial and ethnic categories as well as the move away from visual clues for race in Oree’s narration. The mortal realm in the series is made up of races, ethnicities, and royal family lines, such as Amn, Maro, and Arameri, which have no direct correspondence to contemporary Western racial and ethnic categories, though they are clearly influenced by such cat-

egories. For example, Jemisin refers on her blog to a character from the first book in the series as “half white, half (something like) Inka” (“Why Is Oree Shoth Blind?”). The people in the series are sometimes described as having light or dark skin or straight or curly hair, thereby making some—such as Oree, who is clearly meant to be read as black—recognizable to readers as racially marked.¹² Phenotype information does not, however, always correspond to social power or differential treatment in the text’s society as it might in contemporary American society. The defamiliarization of race here means readers cannot assume that characters who are physically described in ways we would associate with a particular realist racial category are treated in the same way as one would expect of treatment for those within that racial category in a realist setting. Racial signifiers that depend on phenotype and other visual markers thus become less critical to understanding social relations throughout the series, especially in *The Broken Kingdoms*, where narrator Oree cannot generally see other mortals’ features. Instead, Oree focuses on people’s voices, accents, or scents, which indicate their gender, class, and, sometimes, place of origin. This demonstrates how the use of other senses can indicate race or ethnicity in ways not typically prioritized in realist contexts. Blindness combined with the new racial and ethnic categories of the text further defamiliarizes race, revealing our dependence on visual cues to determine racial categories.

In the *Coveted* series, race is defamiliarized through the differential power relationships of various nonhuman groups. The books encourage readers to understand werewolves in particular as a marginalized racial group. In *Kept*, when Natalya tells her wizard friend and romantic interest, Nick, that she does not want to be with him because he’s a wizard, Nick responds, “I never took you for a person who only saw someone’s race, instead of who they truly are” (*Kept* 225). In this moment, race is used to describe different nonhuman groups. These groups are not, in the context of the novels, different species altogether; rather, they are different races that typically live and mate among themselves. Although Natalya ultimately chooses to be with someone of her same race, Natalya’s brother, Alex, accidentally impregnates a wood nymph and decides to marry her and help raise what could therefore be considered their mixed-race, half-nymph, half-werewolf baby.

As Natalya’s refusal to be romantically involved with a wizard suggests, in this fantasy world nonhuman races have different relationships to one another. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham asserts that race is a metalanguage, a “trope of difference, arbitrarily contrived to produce and maintain *relations*

of power and subordination” (255; emphasis added). When Natalya tells Nick she doesn’t want to be with him because he’s a wizard, she is responding to a history of unequal relations of power between werewolves and wizards. In the series, wizards sometimes kidnap shape-shifting beings like werewolves in order to extract their life force to create powerful magic. This extraction process diminishes the lifespan of the shape-shifters involved and can even kill them.¹³ In the supernatural racial hierarchy then, werewolves are below wizards in terms of power and prestige. While werewolves are not direct stand-ins for any particular marginalized group, their representation as being between animal and human and their vulnerability to abuse by spellcasters allows them to be read as a disempowered racial group.

The defamiliarization of race in the *Coveted* series is furthered by the fact that Natalya’s family is Russian and she appears white in her human form, including in the cover illustrations of all the books. This appearance of racial privilege within a human context potentially obscures for readers the racialization of werewolves that occurs in the supernatural context. There is no denying, however, the derogatory and condescending ways other supernatural beings sometimes speak to Natalya, calling her “wolf” even while she is in human form. The defamiliarization of race here therefore also suggests the importance of context to one’s racial identity and experience as Natalya’s racial privileges and oppression vary depending on whether she is in a space with humans, werewolves, or other supernatural beings. While Natalya passes as a white human to humans, other supernatural beings in the series read her exclusively as a werewolf no matter what her form. In these ways then—the categorization of supernatural beings as different races, the racialization of werewolves as an oppressed group, and Natalya’s appearance as racially white in human form—race is defamiliarized in the fantasy nonhuman context of the *Coveted* series as something similar to, yet quite different from how we understand race, racialization, and race relations in our contemporary reality.

The defamiliarization of social categories in black women’s speculative fiction also occurs in regard to gender. In *Sister Mine*, Makeda explains that in the celestial world gender does not exist as it does in the mortal realm, though gendered terms are used in the books to refer to most celestial characters. Immortals, such as Makeda’s uncle Death, at times take over the bodies of humans when in the mortal realm, but do not identify with human concepts of gender. In celestial space, immortals can change their appearance at will. This is made most explicit in discussions of Makeda’s twin cousins, the

Benjis, who, although supposedly different sexes, are so indistinguishable that Makeda can never tell them apart. The text highlights how, as in my earlier discussion of race, gender categories are also often quite dependent on visual cues and a static or predictable external bodymind presentation. Additionally, with the assistance of celestial mojo, sometimes inanimate objects can take on human form. This is represented in the character Lars, Abby's new friend and lover, who was formerly Jimi Hendrix's guitar. Though Lars is referred to with masculine pronouns due to his bodymind presentation, typical understandings of sex and gender are again defamiliarized in regard to this nonhuman character since gender identity terms seem ill-fitting or nonapplicable to a guitar-turned-human being (Hopkinson 66).

In a similar fashion, in the *Inheritance* trilogy to which *Broken Kingdom* belongs, it is explicitly stated that gods and godlings do not have a sex, gender, or even flesh in their true states. However, when visiting the mortal realm, immortals appear in fairly conventionally gendered forms for the sake and comfort of mortals. In the third book in the trilogy, the narrator, Sieh, one of the oldest godlings, states to the reader that gender "is only a game for us, an affectation, like names and flesh. We employ such things because you need them, not because we do" (*The Kingdom of Gods* 99–100). In addition, since gods and godlings have no sex or gender, and since procreation in speculative fiction need not follow realist conventions, in the *Inheritance* trilogy gods and godlings can reproduce with each other in any combination (gods with gods, gods with godlings, godlings with godlings, gods or godlings with mortals). In both *Sister Mine* and the *Inheritance* trilogy, the defamiliarization, or even outright rejection, of sex/gender contributes to an additional defamiliarization of sexuality.

In *Sister Mine*, although procreation between celestials is not explicitly explained, the text does note that due to the lack of concepts of gender as well as the limited pool of celestial beings with whom to mate, what humans would term *incest* is quite common among immortals. Makeda explains that, though relationships among family members is common for celestials, as half-immortals, dating is hard for her and Abby because many celestials look down on them—especially Makeda. Indeed, Makeda feels that she and Abby have already dated all the family members they could tolerate, including the Benjis (Hopkinson 86). This context of the normalcy of familial sexual relationships among celestials sets the groundwork for the defamiliarization of sexuality in *Sister Mine* when Makeda reveals that she and Abby were sexual partners in their teens until she heard Abby jokingly

refer to her as “the donkey” (a derogatory word in the text that refers to mortals without mojo), and they have not been sexual since then (126). The revelation of Makeda and Abby’s sexual relationship in the novel is interspersed with a description of the lives of Chang and Eng, the famous conjoined twins. This portion of the novel defamiliarizes our realist notions of appropriate and inappropriate sexual interactions both within the non-realist context of celestial world norms *and* within the context of disabled bodyminds. After discussing how Chang and Eng were both married with children, Makeda, speaking directly to the reader, states, “You would have said, ‘Chang and Eng’s sex life,’ wouldn’t you? Like they were one person, Changandeng, emphasis on the second syllable. When you’re a twin, the world has its ways of letting you know that you and your sib are a package deal. Everything I had, Abby either had an identical one or she and I would share one. It was like we’d never actually been separated at all. . . . Abby’s body was as familiar to me as my own” (124). The intimacy of conjoined and formerly conjoined twins’ bodies in regard to sexuality reveals how, even without the speculative context, (dis)ability can defamiliarize sexuality. Yet *Sister Mine* insists that readers cannot separate Makeda and Abby’s statuses as twin sisters, formerly conjoined twins, and half-immortals in understanding their sexualities and their relationships, emphasizing intersectionality and the importance of the context in which categories of (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality exist and are given meaning.

In the *Inheritance* trilogy, sexuality is similarly defamiliarized because if god/godlings have no sex or gender and their mortal realm gender presentation is chosen and mutable, then their sexuality cannot be described in gendered-attraction sexuality terms such as hetero-, homo-, or bisexual. This is the case even if the god or godling has sex with or is attracted to a single gender of mortals, because our basic sexuality terms rely on the gender of both parties. Additionally, the sexuality of mortals is challenged by this situation because even if a mortal is typically attracted to a single gender, do gendered-attraction sexuality labels still apply when a mortal has sex with a god/godling who presents in a gendered manner, but who does not actually have a sex or gender as mortals do? And what exactly does it mean to have sex with a god whose true essence is not flesh? Can we understand this as an interspecies sexual encounter?

As these questions suggest, in defamiliarizing sexuality, speculative fiction can also defamiliarize sex and sexual pleasure. In the *Inheritance* trilogy, the sex scenes between mortals and gods/godlings indicate that the gods

and godlings use both their created, gendered flesh and their immortal essence to produce intense sensations (scents, tastes, visions, etc.) into and onto the bodyminds of mortals with whom they have erotic interactions. For example, in a sex scene between Oree and Madding, she says when they kiss that she “felt him . . . all the coolness and fluid aquamarine of him, the edges and ambition. . . . [She] heard chimes again as he flowed into [her] and through [her]” (*The Broken Kingdoms* 111). After kissing, Oree and Madding move to intercourse, and because Madding is “needy” and deep in his own pleasure, he unconsciously lessens control of his magical abilities. As Oree puts it, “He took me places, showed me visions. There are some things mortals aren’t meant to see. When he forgot himself, I saw some of them” (111). Here *The Broken Kingdoms* imagines different possibilities for bodymind pleasure and sex through the immortal beings of the gods and godlings.

The theorization of alternative avenues for sexual pleasure also occurs in the *Coveted* series. Although gendered sexual attractions in the series remain staunchly heterosexual in line with the traditions of the romance novel, the possibilities of sexual pleasure expand beyond the confines of human heterosexual intercourse. For example, after experiencing Nick’s calming spell, Natalya thinks to herself that she wouldn’t mind feeling that sensation on her “girlie bits” (*Coveted* 240). In *Kept*, Nick makes that unspoken wish come true by holding Natalya’s hand and casting a spell that creates pleasure and arousal. Natalya describes the experience as follows, “The warmth flowed up my arm and settled into my chest. My breathing slowed—then quickened. The sensation raced down my legs—fast enough for my toes to curl. What the hell was he doing? . . . I was getting off on his happy magic. . . . Another surge pulsed through me, and my nipples tightened” (*Kept* 124). Once Natalya lets go of Nick’s hand, the sensation stops and his smile makes clear he knew exactly what he was doing. In fact, he likely was also gaining pleasure from the experience as well because, as Nick once informed Natalya, “wizards get a thrill from the exchange too—if it’s with the right person” (*Coveted* 136). In these instances the possibilities for sexual pleasure get expanded beyond normative conceptions of sex through, literally, magic. This expansion implicitly acknowledges that sexuality is more than just how a person identifies in terms of gender preferences; indeed, one’s sexuality incorporates an entire range of erotic desires, expressions, and activities. In both *The Broken Kingdoms* and the *Coveted* series, magic is used as a form of erotic interaction.

The defamiliarization of race, gender, and sexuality in black women’s

speculative fiction is important because it demonstrates that (dis)ability is not an exceptional category in these texts and is therefore not merely metaphoric or symbolic. Instead, (dis)ability represents an integral part of the collective defamiliarization of multiple social categories of privilege and oppression, which encourages readers to imagine each of them differently. The defamiliarization of (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality encourages us to question our assumptions about the definitions, meanings, and boundaries of these categories. Not all speculative fiction, however, works to explore and question social systems of privilege and oppression. As feminist and critical race scholars of speculative fiction have demonstrated, some texts reify social categories and their related stereotypes, even in nonhuman contexts. This is most apparent in representations of the racialized Other through the figure of the alien, robot, or cyborg.¹⁴ It is important then that these contemporary black women writers challenge readers to think about the social construction of (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality through defamiliarization. This creative destabilization and challenging of the norms and stereotypes of multiple social categories is influenced by black feminist theory, which insists on the intersectional and mutually constitutive nature of social categories and oppressions. Defamiliarization in these texts also demonstrate Barbara Christian's argument that creative texts can be a form of theorizing about world. While authors do not need to identify their political positions or personal identities in order for critics to interpret the political implications of their texts, it is nonetheless useful to note that Hopkinson has explicitly identified as both feminist and queer, while Jemisin's blog certainly suggests strong antiracist, feminist politics (Batty 189; N. Johnston 204). While politicized creative work is clearly not exclusive to black women, Madison's, Jemisin's, and Hopkinson's defamiliarization of major social categories are examples of black feminist theorizing through speculative fiction. All three authors, in different ways, refuse certain expectations of (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality while still prioritizing those who are multiply marginalized. These texts therefore provide new and creative ways for readers to question such social categories, not only within these fantastical worlds, but also in their own realist contexts.

THE FANTASY FICTION of N. K. Jemisin, Shawntelle Madison, and Nalo Hopkinson demonstrates that defamiliarization is a major way in which black women authors of speculative fiction are able to reimagine body-

minds and change the rules of representation and interpretation. Through the defamiliarizing contexts of nonhuman characters and fantasy worlds, the meanings of (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality are shifted and challenged from realist definitions and boundaries. Indeed, in these fantasy texts, Jemisin, Madison, and Hopkinson create entirely new rules for representing these categories. Through defamiliarization black women's speculative fiction can make readers aware of their assumptions regarding (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality, possibly leading them to question these assumptions as well.

Mainstream speculative fiction, particularly fantasy fiction, represents a critical area through which disability studies and black feminist scholars can understand how political interventions and representational shifts can be made in a cultural arena typically associated with apolitical juvenility and escapism. Such scholarly work is essential to not only understanding but also changing majoritarian cultural ideologies of (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality. I consider it important therefore to include the work of these newer black women authors of speculative fiction alongside the work of literary legend Octavia E. Butler from previous chapters in order to demonstrate how both mainstream and literary fiction can engage similar concepts and concerns in differing, yet nonetheless productive ways.

I was first exposed to the books in this chapter not in university classrooms or academic conferences, but in online forums, Facebook groups, blogs, and other fan spaces. I read these books because people from around the world who are invested in increasing the diversity of speculative fiction have drawn attention to them as exemplars of the possibilities of nonrealism for representing issues of (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality. Through fiction, art, film, cosplay, blogs, and more, artists and fans from marginalized groups are not merely insisting on the tokenized presence of people of color, women, disabled people, and other marginalized groups in the worlds of speculative fiction, but demonstrating how their presence changes the rules of the genre and alters the possibilities of fan spaces as well. Mainstream texts, such as the fantasy fiction discussed in this chapter, say a lot about contemporary cultural understandings of the social systems of (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality. As a result, analysis of this type of work has substantial value for black feminist and disability studies scholars.