

CONCLUSION

Neither black nor disabled people have any reason to be enamored of the status quo. As disabled black SF authors we have the opportunity to revision the dominant culture's narrative.—NISI SHAWL, "Invisible Inks"

I began this book with the concern that black feminist and disability studies scholars do not communicate or engage enough with each other's work. I asserted that each field would benefit by interacting more with the other. While it is important that I have identified representations of (dis)ability in black women's speculative fiction, especially representations of disabled women protagonists, this search-and-find approach means little if the resulting analyses don't implicate social, cultural, intellectual, and political concerns within broader fields and society at large. My intention has been to demonstrate how a combined black feminist disability studies framework can help scholars of (dis)ability, race, and gender better trace and understand the mutually constitutive nature of these categories as identities, experiences, systems of privilege and oppression, and historical constructs. This project is about the representation of (dis)ability, race, and gender in black women's speculative fiction, yet I hope it has meaning for so many spaces beyond these texts. However, before I talk more about the larger implications of my work and suggest next steps in black feminist and disability

studies scholarship, let me first go back and trace some of the central claims I have made here in *Bodyminds Reimagined*.

I have insisted throughout this work that speculative fictional texts by Octavia E. Butler, Phyllis Alesia Perry, N. K. Jemisin, Shawntelle Madison, and Nalo Hopkinson are not merely imaginative escapes into alternative worlds. Instead, these works are theorizations of the possibilities and meanings of bodyminds that change the rules of interpretation and require modes of analysis that take into account both the relationships between (dis)ability, race, and gender and the contexts in which these categories exist. In the case of Butler's *Kindred*, disability is ever-present as both metaphor and materiality. Rather than being either the outcome of racist violence or a metaphor for the impact of the history of slavery, disability is simultaneously a justification for the enslavement of black people and a material effect of this racist institution. Perry's *Stigmata* demonstrates how concepts of able-mindedness are deeply dependent on racial and gender norms that impact how individuals' behaviors are interpreted and how people are then treated within the psychiatric medical-industrial complex and the wider world. Butler's *Parable* series imagines (dis)ability, race, and gender as important parts of our future. The series insists on a holistic and contextualized approach to the nonrealist disability of hyperempathy that takes into account not only how this disability impacts Lauren's bodymind, but also how her other identities, life experience, and physical and social environments shape the way she experiences her disability as well. Further, the representation of hyperempathy rejects cultural assumptions about the inherent value of a technologically created, disability-free future in ways that directly implicate issues of race, gender, and class, thereby insisting on diversity in visions of the future. Finally, Jemisin's *The Broken Kingdoms*, Madison's *Coveted* series, and Hopkinson's *Sister Mine* each use nonhuman bodyminds and fantastical environmental and social contexts to defamiliarize (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality. In doing so, Jemisin, Madison, and Hopkinson each provide alternative meanings to these categories within their fantastical worlds so that readers might question their assumptions about these terms in the realist world as well.

Collectively, the reimagining of the possibilities and meanings of bodyminds in contemporary black women's speculative fiction challenges our assumptions about (dis)ability, race, and gender and thereby changes the rules of how we read and interpret representations of these categories. By having racialized, disabled women protagonists who narrate their own texts

and who live in future or alternative worlds in which the rules of reality are different, these books force readers to understand the experience of their intersectional identities from the main character's perspective, from within their bodyminds, their lives, and their societies. The tendency in disability studies toward life writing, documentary, and other realist representations of disability is undergirded by a desire to challenge negative understandings of people with disabilities. A similar leaning toward authenticity and realism has historically occurred among black writers, intellectuals, and activists. As my discussions of these texts demonstrate, however, such challenges to limited, problematic, or oppressive representations of marginalized people can also occur through speculative fiction, through nonrealist, fantastical, and nonhuman contexts that change the rules of reality, making us think more critically about how our current rules and assumptions about (dis)ability, race, and gender have come into being in the first place. This is not to say that speculative fiction can replace or is better than realist fiction, but, rather, that it offers important alternative avenues of representation that should not be dismissed. By altering what bodyminds can and cannot do and the worlds in which these bodyminds exist and are given meaning, black women's speculative fiction alters the categories of (dis)ability, race, and gender in ways that can be productive, instructional, and thought-provoking. The nonrealism of the texts takes us outside of our rules of reality in order to draw attention to how these rules, which eventually become naturalized assumptions and understandings, are mutable and contextual, rather than fixed. I have examined the interactions of these social categories in specific places in specific texts in order to demonstrate how such an intersectional analysis of (dis)ability, race, and gender might be performed on different sites of analysis, literary or otherwise.

This brings us then to the larger implications of this work beyond the realm of literary criticism and even, I hope, beyond the walls of the academy. I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this work how, by altering and defamiliarizing (dis)ability, race, and gender, black women's speculative fiction also highlights the ways oppressions resulting from these systems can overlap, intersect, support, and sustain one another in real-world power dynamics and interactions. I would like to particularly emphasize this point and its application beyond the covers of this book. Too often disability discourse and representation is evacuated of meaning in the work of antiracist and feminist scholars and activists as being *actually* about race or gender. As I discussed in chapter 1, this is typically due to a desire to distance cer-

tain marginalized groups from disability as a form of stigma management. At the same time, disability studies scholars have often performed the reverse move and documented the ways disability has been used as a master trope of disqualification and discrimination for most marginalized groups, therefore essentially arguing that all oppression is, at its root, ableism. The attempt to prove a master status or master oppression assumes that one category, system, or oppression is somehow prior to the others when, in fact, they are constantly shifting and shaping each other.

I find it more useful, therefore, to identify the multiple discursive systems at play even when certain identity groups do not seem to be present. This is the kind of intersectional approach that I hope this book can foster in scholars and activists alike. As I explained in the introduction, my approach to *intersectionality* takes critiques of this concept into account without leaving the term behind. I have therefore provided close and intimate tracings of the relationships of various oppressions in specific texts and textual moments. This tracing of the relationships of oppressions operates outside of the traditional metaphorical frames of intersectionality as a matrix, a highway intersection, or a Venn diagram. Unfortunately, the workings of power are not something we can simplistically visualize and chart—as useful as such static visuals may be for initially thinking about intersectionality. The kind of intersectional approach I use here, which incorporates and centers the experiences of multiply marginalized subjects but is not limited to these experiences, allow us, for example, to read enactments of medical and scientific racism as not only racist, but also as ableist toward both disabled and nondisabled people of color. These systems are so deeply entrenched and entangled that they cannot be cleanly separated. Our scholarly attempts at articulating these relationships, therefore, should be attentive to the multiple analytics of (dis)ability, race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation while still being flexible enough to decide which are most prevalent or important in a particular context. Similarly, our activist attempts to combat a particular oppression should remain aware of how these systems operate in not merely intersectional—that is, operating at the same time in the lives of multiply marginalized people—but also overlapping and mutually constitutive ways. Understanding the role of ableism in the operation of racism and the role of racism in the operation of sexism (and so on and so forth) is fundamental to effective liberation movements. Audre Lorde argues that we cannot use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house (110–14). Translating the metaphor here, we cannot take down the house of what bell hooks calls the

“imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” without understanding how ableism was and is used to build, support, and reinforce that house (*We Real Cool* xiii). Without recognizing ableism as a part of the house that needs to get taken down or by continuing to participate in ableism in anti-racist and feminist work, we are only further entrenching systems that are being used to oppress us.

I want to particularly emphasize that my approach to intersectionality has included identity without being limited to identity. There have been numerous critiques lately of identity politics—often by the same scholars who are critical of intersectionality—which argue that this approach to political organizing is limited, normalizing, unable to incorporate differences in experience, and easily co-opted into consumable markers of individuality within neoliberalism. In response to such critiques, Julie Avril Minich writes that “identity politics are just as easily mobilized to contest the neoliberal state as to reinforce it. Furthermore, while it is true that identity claims *can* flatten out the heterogeneous experiences and attributes of the members of an identity group, it does not logically follow that this flattening is necessary or inherent to political projects predicated on identity” (*Accessible Citizenships* 161; original emphasis). As a result, Minich argues that we cannot “know how identity will change in the absence of oppression that targets marked bodies, and we cannot know without eliminating that oppression”; therefore, rather than theorize “for a post-identity or post-national future, we need to theorize for the present we currently occupy, one in which nationalisms and identity categories—however normalizing and co-optable they may be—structure our social world in profound ways and impact people’s life chances” (189). I align myself with Minich and other feminists of color who seek to destabilize and strategize uses of identity for the purposes of well-being and collective social justice action.

At the same time, I have not limited my analyses to identity alone because, as I have argued above, oppressions operate in our lives despite our identities. Ableism, racism, and sexism impact us even if we do not identify as disabled, people of color, women, trans-, or gender-nonconforming. Alison Kafer writes, “In focusing so intently on disability identity, how have disability studies and disability rights movements overlooked the crip insights of [those who do not identify as disabled] . . . what can disability studies and disability movements learn from our own exclusions?” (*Feminist, Queer, Crip* 153). By taking an intersectional approach that acknowledges the role of identity, experience, social systems of privilege and oppression, and

social constructions, I have sought here, and will continue to seek in future work, to find the political and personal benefits of identity politics while still remaining attentive to the ways racism, ableism, and sexism operate outside or beyond identity claims. This is particularly important in disability studies where there are often questions of who should be identified as disabled and what should and should not be included under the umbrella of disability studies as opposed to, perhaps, body studies, medical humanities, death and dying studies, or illness and health studies.

I would now like to offer a few brief suggestions for the next steps which could occur in future scholarship based on or in conversation with the work I have done here. First, my greatest hope is to see more scholarship coming from black feminist and disability studies scholars conversant in each field. For black feminist literary scholars in particular, I hope we can return to the texts we know, love, and constantly teach in order to explore how (dis)ability plays out, no longer ignoring it or reading it as purely metaphor. I believe this work, a reexamination of well-known black texts, can provoke new readings of the African American literary canon and provide us a more nuanced understanding of the relationship of (dis)ability, womanhood, and blackness over time in the United States and elsewhere. Second, I want to encourage both fields to do more work on nonrealist representations. I believe this work particularly needs to occur in regard to other writers of color, like Monique Truong, Samuel Delany, Nisi Shawl, and Jacqueline Koyanagi. There is especially much to be explored in the work of authors who engage with magical realism, vodun/voodoo, mysticism, and other culturally specific, nonrealist elements. Similarly, there is important work to be done on work by disabled writers of speculative fiction, but that work may require expanding beyond writers who actively identify as disabled to include those who publicly acknowledge having a disability, condition, or disease. For example, Butler identified as having dyslexia, but did not refer to herself as disabled.¹ As a whole then, I hope my work here encourages more scholars to explore what speculative fiction and other nonrealist modes can teach us about the relationship of (dis)ability, race, gender, and other social categories.

I opened this book with a quote from Gloria Anzaldúa which insisted on the relationship of change in the real world to change inside our minds. To close, I want to return to this notion and assert, first, that the representation of (dis)ability in black women's speculative fiction can challenge and change our understanding of (dis)ability, race, and gender (including the relation-

ship between these terms) by providing new and unusual representations. In doing this, these texts hold opportunities for change at the individual level, as the concluding discussion in chapter 3, including the #BecauseOf Octavia hashtag, suggests. Individual change, while not sufficient enough on its own for macro-level change, is nonetheless a necessary part of changing oppressive cultures. The representational power and potential of black women's speculative fiction cannot be dismissed. Second, I assert that while black women's speculative fiction can be challenging with its frequent engagement with oppression and potential dystopian futures, these texts can also be pleasurable. This point may seem self-evident or benign, but it's incredibly important and worth elaborating on here, especially in the context of antiracist, anti-ableist, and feminist scholarship and activism.

Sometimes in the academy there is the suggestion that pleasure and intellectual work cannot combine, that our work is only recognizable as work if it is hard, if it exhausts us. Sometimes in feminism and social justice movements there is the suggestion that increased political awareness reduces one's ability to take pleasure in cultural productions, that we cannot watch a film or read a book without being critical—and that critical eye reduces or eliminates pleasure. This is something my students occasionally tell me, that my classes have “ruined” certain shows or films they used to like—before they realized how ableist, racist, or sexist they were. I tell them that if my course makes them think about issues of (dis)ability, race, and gender outside the context of class and homework, then I've done my job. Because we *should* all balk when we see a nondisabled actor playing a disabled character; we *should* all be upset when the only black character in a show is a one-dimensional stereotype; we *should* all be exasperated when the heretofore strong independent female lead ends up needing to be rescued by a man with whom she then falls in love. But that doesn't mean that recognizing problematic elements in a text or in our world negates our capacity for pleasure.

In advocating increased, nuanced engagement with speculative fiction in this book, I also want to advocate for pleasure. Pleasure does not exist outside of oppression because none of us exist outside of these systems of power, but pleasure can nonetheless arise in the midst of oppression, in the face of it, in spite of it, or sometimes even because of it. I understand pleasure here to be a broad category of positive feelings and emotions, including joy, pride, affirmation, love, and hope. For instance, I felt joy seeing Beyoncé's video for her song “Formation” (and later, her performance of the song

at the Super Bowl in 2016), but the pleasure of that video for me was deeply entwined with oppression. In the “Formation” music video, there are references to Hurricane Katrina and police violence against black people, references which draw on the incredible antiblack racist violence in the United States that repeatedly marks black lives and bodyminds as less valuable. Yet for me there was pleasure in seeing those references to oppression in the music video because they were also an affirmation of the need to value black lives, and these images were coming from an incredibly popular mainstream artist who was forcing racial politics into the faces of many Americans who would prefer she keep singing and dancing about love and breakups instead. Beyoncé used that video—and the later visual album *Lemonade*—to affirm black people, her place among us, and her love for us. There can be pleasure within representations of oppression because there is joy in seeing oneself represented, even one’s oppression represented, after so much denial. Seeing reflections of ourselves in representations often means feeling seen as well, knowing we are not alone.

There was a point in working on this book, however, when I started to lose sight of pleasure in any capacity. When I was working on revisions for the conclusion of chapter 2, I had recently moved for a postdoctoral fellowship and was spending the bulk of my time alone in my new apartment reading and writing about violence against black people. I started having trouble sleeping and was feeling increasingly nervous around police and police-like figures such as park rangers. I was emotionally drained at the end of each day, even though I only allowed myself to research one person per day (Tamir Rice today, Barbara Dawson tomorrow, and so on). I took to Facebook to ask folks how they do self-care when one’s work involves such continual engagement with trauma and oppression. Friends from far and wide offered advice like limiting my contact with the traumatic material, cuddling furry creatures, hugging friends, taking breaks, going for walks, yoga, meditation, prayer, and engaging with materials that bring me joy. I ended up making it a daily practice to finish my work time by standing in my hallway and reading aloud the print I have of the Lucille Clifton poem “won’t you celebrate with me.” This brief poem ends with the lines “come celebrate / with me that everyday / something has tried to kill me / and has failed” (Clifton 25). My daily practice became a multilayered source of pleasure for me. First, it marked the end of a work day, the end of looking at, reading about, and listening to violence against black people and justifications for that violence. Second, it affirmed that my survival is no small

thing, that the failure of all those forces to kill me each day (bodily, emotionally, or otherwise) was worth appreciating. Furthermore, it reminded me that my ability to find ways to write about this violence was also important and worth celebrating. Finally, on a more meta level, it reminded me of the potential of writing and representation because of the fact that Clifton's short poem was exactly what I needed to remember pleasure, power, and purpose.

So what does all this have to do with speculative fiction by black women? As I have said before, this genre has sometimes been dismissed because it is considered juvenile, escapist, nonliterary, or even, strangely, too accessible.² In other words, speculative fiction is often considered too easy, too fun, and therefore too pleasurable to be serious or political. I hope that my analyses in this book have demonstrated this to be far from the case, but in arguing for the theoretical insights and political potential of these texts, I also don't want to forgo the pleasure of them because, as I have been suggesting above, pleasure is also political.

Speculative fiction can be so pleasurable to read. It can be fun, interesting, and enthralling. There were times I read texts in a single sitting, and I read more books for this study than could possibly be included. While I may have critiques of the texts I have analyzed throughout this book, I became invested in writing about the work of Butler, Perry, Jemisin, Madison, and Hopkinson not because of the moments they frustrated me, but because of how they fascinated me, how they made me think differently and imagine things I had never thought of before. They offered representations of (dis)ability I had not found elsewhere, representations that included race and gender politics and clear expressions of sexuality, representations that spoke to important realist political concerns while still being set in non-realist worlds. I enjoyed and continue to enjoy these books (and others like them) because there is so much to say about them. I take pleasure in both reading and analyzing them. So often our work in disability studies and black feminism focuses on oppression, but for this book, I insist on acknowledging and ending with pleasure.