consider myself both an academic theorist immersed in disability studies, gender and sexuality studies, and critical race studies and a practitioner of institutional equity and inclusion work. I have frequently experienced this balance of theory and practice as a paradox in which I am employed to perform labor aimed at raising awareness of and decreasing systemic and interpersonal oppression by an academic institution and within a set of national and professional structures that are built on and complicit with neoliberal capitalist domination. Thus, I often find myself engaging social justice work within higher education that utilizes many of the concepts and related practices that I critique in my academic writing. There is a friction here that affects not only me. From the perspective of professional practitioners concerned with equity and inclusion, critical social and other academic theory can be perceived as too abstract, inaccessible, or impractical. From the perspective of critical social theorists, the practice of diversity work may be understood to be assimilating radical ideas into neoliberal and depoliticizing institutional structures. Such frictions remind me that one of the barriers to building more equitable and inclusive spaces is the fiction that theory and practice are separable and opposing things. This fiction circulates not only at the theoretical level in academic writing, where we are often most comfortable pointing out the limitations and flaws in concepts like identity, diversity, and inclusion, but also in the ways we divide work within our institutions—“student affairs” versus “academic affairs,” for example. How are academic affairs not student affairs, and how is the support and well-being of our stu-
dents not an academic matter? This book takes as a foundational assumption that critical social theories such as critical disability studies, critical race studies, and feminist/gender studies grow out of social justice movements and continue to inform the practices we utilize to create greater equity and justice within the flawed systems in which we find ourselves.

Disabled Futures enters into conversation with work in disability studies, gender and sexuality studies, and critical race studies in hopes of building a framework for thinking about how to more effectively address inequity as a set of interlocking systems that both disable and constitute human subjects. In this book, I use readings of literature and film to explore the constitutive and oppressive intersections between ableism, racism, and sexism/cissexism/heteronormativity. These ideologies and systems of power work in particular and historically informed collaborations to constitute subjects in the contemporary United States. I consider race, gender, and disability to be distinct and identifiable subject positions and self-identifications. At the same time, I argue that the ways we conceptualize these aspects of our identities and the power structures and liberation politics that may attend to them continue to be treated in false isolation from one another.

Recently, while preparing several internal equity/diversity/inclusion-related trainings at my home institution, I found myself engaging in a set of debates about how and whether to include information for participants on the difference between equity and equality. Primarily, these debates centered on the now widely used and fairly widely critiqued comparative illustrations designed by Craig Froehle of three human figures of different heights trying to look over a fence to see a baseball game. In the illustration on the left, frequently labeled “equality,” each figure stands on a single box of uniform size—unnecessary for the first figure, who is the tallest; just high enough for the second figure, who is slightly shorter; and not high enough for the third, who is the shortest. In the illustration on the right, most often labeled “equity,” “justice,” or “fairness,” the first figure stands on no box, the second stands on one box, and the third stands on two boxes, allowing all to see over the fence.

While reviewing an online diversity training, which focused largely on power and privilege, our faculty/staff committee decided to leave this illustration out. We were all aware of the critiques of the illustration, including its unmarked whiteness and how it reinforces a deficit model by implying that the source of inequity is located in individual bodies (i.e., the height of the figures) rather than in the histories of systemic oppression, exclusion, and stigma that have created deep barriers to access and resources. A few weeks later, when a different group of faculty/staff reviewers was making some final revisions for a more focused internal training on ableism and accessibility, the
The question of whether to include this illustration arose again. Again, the critique was made that while the illustration is useful for pointing out that different bodies need different accommodations, it does not address the histories of systemic oppression of people with disabilities or the hegemonic environmental barriers themselves, represented in the illustration by the static fence. To address the issue this time I replaced the original illustration with a revised version designed by Paul Kuttner, which includes staggered ground and an inclined fence, and in which figures look more like plastic cut-outs that are all the same height and are colored red, yellow, and blue. Kuttner’s version suggests that histories of power have put some people on lower ground and given some people more barriers than others, and it attempts to take away bodily social identity markers like race, gender, and disability status. This time, however, there was more pushback. In the context of raising awareness about ableism, our group wanted to stress that difference is, in fact, located in bodies and that to make the figures all the same height actually carries ableist assumptions about how we represent equity and inclusivity. To make the figures all the same size suggests that we are not, in fact, talking about real embodied differences—differences that frequently matter very much to people with disabilities.

It was not until I attempted to use Froehle’s illustration in the context of social justice awareness work that I started to think that the problem may be less the illustration itself and more the ways we conceptualize various forms
of oppression and avenues for their redress. Numerous illustrations have emerged to address the limitations of Froehle’s original. Some have changed it so that the figures read as people of color. Several illustrations include people who appear to be of varying racial backgrounds. Some include more femme-appearing folks. One replaces two blocks with a ramp and shows the third person at the top in a wheelchair. Many include a third illustration labeled “liberation” or “justice” that has a chain-link fence or no fence. Such revisions are ways of attending to what is a conceptually helpful but not particularly inclusive representation with illustrations that increase the types of bodies, experiences, and ways of thinking about power represented. No matter how much we add to this illustration, however, there remains an impasse in inclusive representation that stems from a lack of a shared way of thinking about oppression that is both historical/systemic/environmental and deeply rooted in bodies and bodily experience. Understanding how multiple forms of oppression, including racism, (cis)sexism, and ableism, intersect to create inequity necessitates a conception of oppression and liberation that understands bodyminds, histories, and environments to exist in dynamic relation to each other to produce privilege, oppression, agency, power, subjectivity, and subjection.

Working at the Intersections of Race, Gender, and Disability

This book attempts to theorize social identity and power as always already both embodied and historically and environmentally created. To do so, it looks to close textual analyses as sites for illuminating how we are all constituted as subjects within an intersectional racist, sexist, and ableist society. My hope is that such understandings can contribute to strategies for intervening in ableism, racism, and sexism that can be understood to impact and benefit people who identify as disabled and able-bodied, people of all and no gender identity/ies, and people of all racial identities in the United States. This, I consider, to be a radical framework in that it looks to some of the historical and environmental roots of our identities and to the oppressions, limitations, and privileges that arise in relationship to them. I also consider it a radical form of inclusivity in that it is concerned with the ways our liberations really are bound up in one another, and therefore provides a foundation for engaged allyship work across and within identity groups. In particular, the readings in this book (1) examine and unpack specific ways that race and gender construct and are constructed by historical notions of ability and disability, sickness and health, and successful recovery versus damaged lives and (2) consider how affective and representational relationships to futurity impact how
we currently do and potentially can imagine embodiment within raced, gendered, and dis/abled subjectivities. In applying a disability studies lens to readings of race and gender, and critical race and gender and sexuality studies lenses to representations of disability, what begins to emerge is not only a more complex and deeper understanding of the intersections between ableism, racism, and (cis)sexism but also, and equally as important to imagining alternate and more radically inclusive futures, an expanded space for holding and acknowledging the simultaneous limitations and power of our embodied identities, and the ways they are intertwined with the identities, experiences, freedoms, and oppressions of others.

The readings in this text attempt to decipher the distinct but interdependent workings of ableism, racism, and (cis)sexism in a number of different representations and in so doing to refract or change the directionality of our common ways of perceiving gendered, raced, and dis/abled identities. In the service of referring to such an interpretive lens without repeatedly explaining it at length, I have coined the term “racialized disgender.” This term is meant to capture how (1) all gender identities are always already raced, (2) all racialized gender identities are constituted in relation to the able/disabled binary, and (3) racialized gender acts on the body via a process of disablement, not only through limiting access to physical and political spaces for those with marginalized racial and gender identities but, moreover, by constituting raced and gendered bodies through external violence, impairment, and social control over our physical, emotional, and mental engagement with the world and others. Racialized disgender as I use it here is not a metaphor for race and gender. Racism and (cis)sexism have their own distinct set of violences and logics. And people with disabilities have been used as metaphors for harm, marginalization, or dysfunction for far too long. Racialized disgendering is a description of a set of linguistic, ideological, and physical practices that constitutes racialized gender identity in direct relation to ideas about healthy and able bodies as well as in relation to physical, emotional, and psychological limitations on and violences done to individuals.

My thinking here is deeply indebted to the concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality as a political and theoretical idea comes out of Black feminist politics and theory and was historically necessitated by the “single axis” thinking of white-dominated feminisms and male-dominated Black liberation movements (Crenshaw 138). The term itself was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to better address “the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (140). The importance of attending to the specific experiences and knowledges of women of color is also often traced to arguments by the Combahee River Collective, as well as theorists such as Gloria Anzaldúa, An-
gela Davis, Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, and Barbara Smith, who stressed the importance of not only race and gender but also sexuality, size, ethnicity, language, and ability status as mutually constitutive identities and systems of power. Patricia Hill Collins coined the term “matrix of domination” to describe how power works through various forms of interdependent oppressions (Black Feminist Thought 18) and reminds us in her 2016 Key Concepts series monograph, Intersectionality, co-written with Sirma Bilge, that “intersectional frameworks understand power relations through a lens of mutual construction [in which] power relations . . . gain meaning in relation to one another” (27). That the term “intersectionality” has been at the center of much critical debate in the past few years suggests to me not that it has been overdone or irredeemably co-opted by a conservative neoliberal academy (as some have argued).7 Rather, it points to the need for ongoing work to develop critical practices that both attend to intersectionality’s foundational claim that the perspectives of those multiply marginalized by structures of identity-based oppressions can provide needed insight into the workings of those systems and also deepen our understanding of the ways we are all constituted by and all simultaneously limited by these systems.8

Disabled Futures draws on the double work of intersectional theory—attending to specific marginalizations and clarifying broader workings of power—to explore the interdependence and co-construction of race, gender, and disability in James Cameron’s film Avatar, J. J. Abram’s television series Lost, Arturo Islas’s novel The Rain God, Cherrie Moraga’s play Heroes and Saints, Audre Lorde’s essay collection The Cancer Journals, Miriam Engelberg’s comic memoir Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person, and Octavia Butler’s Xenogenesis trilogy (published most recently in one volume titled Lilith’s Brood). I pursue these readings not only in the hope of revealing more about how the matrix of domination that uses ableism, racism, and (cis)sexism as tools to replicate itself functions but also in the hope of highlighting that we are all impacted by the intersections of these forms of domination and that each of our bodyminds is constituted within them. The close analyses in this book proceed not by assuming preexisting categories of race, gender, or ability/disability but rather by thinking about how these categories are inconceivable without the others. Each reading takes as a premise that becoming raced is also a gendering process, that becoming gendered is also a racializing process, and that becoming racially gendered is for every social subject simultaneously enabling (in terms of gaining access to subjecthood) and disabling (in terms of both how it can limit social, political, and economic access and how it can cause harm to the bodyminds of those subjects). I posit these analyses as a set of models for talking about how such forms of power, and the subjects and identity groups that they construct, are always already in-
forming one another and how they affect every bodymind that comes into being as a social and political subject within them.

In approaching intersectionality between ableism, racism, and (cis)sexism, this book aims to bring together the disability and race-focused critiques of scholars such as Christopher Bell, Nirmala Erevelles, Julie Avril Minich, and Therí Pickens with the disability and gender-/sexuality-focused critiques of scholars such as Eli Clare, Alison Kafer, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. As Clare, Kafer, and Garland-Thomson argue, normative gender is both a highly ableist and racialized category itself in the United States. Similarly, Bell, Erevelles, Minich, and Pickens make arguments that suggest not only that bodies that inhabit intersections of disability and racial nonwhiteness are targets of violence and social erasure but also that racial nonwhiteness has historically been a category defined heavily in relation to disability in ways that reproduce and reinforce practices of violence against people of color. Like Minich’s desire to “emphasiz[e] similarities, not differences, between people with disabilities and other minoritized groups” (22) and Pickens’s intent to “push back against the idea that normalcy or belonging is a state to which [one] should aspire” (*New Body Politics* 12), my argument looks for moments in which representations of racialized and gendered bodies highlight the histories of disablement that have created their material and social realities and identities, without aspiring to heal or overcome these histories.

Disability and Futurity

While intersections between race, dis/ability, and gender are far from exhaustive of the many identities and power relations that constitute us as subjects, race, disability status, and gender are three aspects of our social and political selves that have historically been theorized not only in isolation from one another, a fact to which the intersectional critiques of Crenshaw and others attest, but often in purposeful antipathy to one another. Ableist ideology has been used as a tool to distance feminist, LGBTQ, and racial justice movements from identification with people with disabilities. As Vivian May and Beth Ferri argue, “An impairment or deficit model has been used by those in power to characterize marginalized groups . . . as incapable of full citizenship,” which has in turn led to the use of ableist concepts and metaphors within many social justice movements that do not understand themselves to be aligned with the disabled (120). This logic appeared in the reading of the “equity vs. equality” illustrations that opened this Introduction, in which locating difference in individual bodies is read as inherently a “deficit” model. If we are to truly use intersectionality as the radical—as in reaching to the roots—tool that many believe it to be, we need to keep sharp-
ening its edges and looking for the most subtle and nuanced ways we can use it to decipher and thus hopefully intervene in workings of power.\textsuperscript{10} We also need a way of attending to a complex understanding of social identities and oppression as constructed by our environment and simultaneously lived at the material level of the body. Such an understanding can help us to think about how we can live in the present with a full awareness of the histories of woundedness, disempowerment, limitation, and harm done by our coming into subjecthood within a matrix of oppression that marks and forms our bodyminds to serve dominant forms of power, without letting that awareness pull us away from conscious and conscientious action, activism, and allyship in the present. Such a model enables us to think about futures that we may desire that are not free from histories of or even present experiences of woundedness, limitation, frustration, or barriers.

Disability studies provides models for holding conceptual space for both the negative and positive experiences of our lived identities and relations to power. Holding those experiences and affective relations in the present provides a foundation for future imaginaries that can prompt action in resistance to power that limits and confines us while simultaneously understanding that liberation is not freedom from all limitations, wounds, or pain. While the critique of identity-based politics that it is too attached to histories of pain and marginalization continues to circulate in critical social theory, disability theory provides alternate ways of thinking about ambivalent but necessary and even potentially productive relations to pain and current/historical woundedness.\textsuperscript{11} Susan Wendell argues that there is potential epistemological value to pain and that we must “learn to talk about . . . that which cannot be noticed without pain and that which cannot be celebrated without ambivalence” (179). Tobin Siebers articulates this ambivalence on a political/theoretical level, arguing that while “opponents of identity politics are not wrong . . . when they associate minority identity with suffering,” they are mistaken in that “they do not accept that pain and suffering may sometimes be resources for the epistemological insights of minority identity” (20). This study, following Wendell and Siebers, foregrounds the value of historical and contemporary wounds of identity in relation to the potential epistemic privilege they provide.\textsuperscript{12} Pain and other physical and emotional negative feelings like fatigue, guilt, trauma, and anger may be bodily signals of social inequities that those who embody minority social identities have more access to. Physical and psychological pain can be both experiences we may want to mediate and sources of knowledge and connection.\textsuperscript{13}

Suffering, particularly when shared with others in similarly oppressed positions, can create theoretical knowledges about the functioning of power, privilege, and inequality. Heather Love gestures toward this in her work on
queer negativity, where she suggests that the turn toward pride and hope in queer politics has harmed our ability to incorporate the “dark side” of queer representation and histories of queerness as histories of erasure, violence, and exclusion. Tellingly, she gestures toward a need to better understand how to “liv[e] with injury—not fix[] it” (4). Bodies marked as queer and bodies marked as having disabilities have incurred different kinds of histories of violence, marginalization, and physical and psychological wounding. Nevertheless, Love’s use of injury to talk about aspects of queer history that may get lost in the push toward more optimistic futures suggests that disability theory, which has thought deeply and complexly about injury, impairment, and disability as an inextricable part of one’s social identity, could be a rich source to approach a politics that looks toward a more accessible, equitable, and less violent future without having to sever affective attachments to disability, impairment, and wounds.

The concept of “disabled futures” attends to the need to hold space for the value and the pain of identity even as we resist systems and ideologies of ableism, racism, and (cis)sexism that function through the creation of unwanted pain and domination. As Alison Kafer points out, disability is so often used to mean tragedy that the very presence of disability can signal “a future that bears too many traces of the ills of the present to be desirable” (2). Eunjung Kim suggests that ideologies of cure “fold” time into a relation to past cause and future healing that prevents one from living fully in the present with a disability. Such dominant forms of ableist thinking not only put people with disabilities in a position outside of valued human life and contribute to eugenicist thinking that aims to rid the world of people with disabilities; they also disallow the traces of ills that have constituted all of us as subjects a place in our realities and in the ways we move toward less oppressive and more aware futures. Anna Mollow’s concept of the “disability drive” is also useful for thinking through U.S. culture’s ambivalent relationship to disability, woundedness, and marginalization. Disability drive, according to Mollow, is our individual and cultural attraction to and repulsion from the loss of self that a queer and/or disabled future would threaten/promise. Mining this ambivalent affective and subconscious relation to such a future can help us explore possible alternatives to what Mollow terms “rehabilitative” futures that conserve current power structures and promote fear of loss, pain, and disability, all of which are inevitably part of our human experience and deeply embedded in our gender, racial, and dis/ability identities. The concept of disabled futures I employ in this text resists rehabilitative and curative models and intervenes in critiques of identity-based politics that suggest we must rid ourselves of or detach ourselves from wounded identities in order to imagine a more liberated future.
I argue that all bodies constituted as subjects in the United States come into being as racially gendered subjects directly and inextricably in relation to assumptions about able-bodiedness, mental health, normative expectations for movement and social relationality, and imposed/internalized limitations to body and mind. I argue in the chapters that follow that while some texts may be more useful for unpacking the ways that racialized gender constitutes bodies in relation to disability—and these are often texts written by and with the epistemic privilege of disabled or ill women and queers of color—the framework that I am constructing can be used to talk about the effects of these power structures on any body. Social power functions not only through the ways bodies experience material privilege and marginalization along lines of social identity but also through the psychological and emotional harm to all bodies and the threat of further harm if one does not accept the limits of their racially gendered position. While the types of harm and the extent to which bodies are stigmatized and experience (the threat of) direct physical violence varies hugely across racial, gender, and dis/ability categories, all U.S. subjects are constituted as raced, gendered, and dis/abled subjects via histories of violence.

The idea that gender and race are constituted through impairment and disability is not a new one. There is a fairly long genealogy of work theorizing the creation of race and gender through disability and impairment, though it is not always named as such. Iris Marion Young has argued that ideologies of womanhood “physically handicap” women and girls. Susan Bordo has demonstrated how agoraphobia, hysteria, and anorexia have been created by cultural expectations for white middle-class women. Diane Herndl notes that the emergence of the white “invalid woman” in the mid-nineteenth century was directly related to ideals of bourgeois femininity that reinforced the embodiment of female ideals through debilitating clothing and practices that deprived girls of protein-rich foods, exercise, and hygiene (*Invalid Women* 27–28). Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant suggests that the cultural myth of the strong Black woman results in illness for many Black women. Jim Downs has studied the emergence of current categories of disability in relation to labor in the treatment of freed Blacks during Reconstruction. Dennis Tyler Jr. argues that during the Jim Crow era, “the law’s proclivity to disable functioned as another way to discipline and control Black bodies that it deemed deviant and unruly” (186). And Jay Dolmage has studied the entwined constructions of disability and racial nonwhiteness via eugenics-informed immigration practices in the early twentieth-century United States. Such readings clarify ways that raced forms of gender indoctrination
and gendered forms of racial indoctrination harm, limit, and constitute bodies as identifiable subjects.

It is not only in studies of marginalized racial and gender identities that intersections with disability and illness arise. Thandeka argues that white racial identity in the United States is formed developmentally though “an injury to [the white child’s] core sense of self” and that this injury is “too traumatic to retain in consciousness” (17, 87). Steve Martinot argues that white racial identity and community is constituted by a kind of shared “social paranoia” (57). Michael Kimmel studies how men are created through “codes” of boyhood that leave them “disconnected from a wide range of emotions,” making them “more prone to depression [and] suicidal behavior,” and more likely to be diagnosed with emotional disturbances and ADHD than children of other genders (53–54). And James Harrison, James Chin, and Thomas Ficcarotto have suggested that cultural expectations for masculinity are not only unhealthy but can also be literally “lethal” for men (282).

I do not cite these texts because I find myself in full agreement with their methodologies or assumptions, or because they are all equally useful to the readings I engage with in this text. Rather, I reference them to highlight that relations between race and disability and gender and disability have been a part of race and gender studies even as they have not always been named as such and have only more recently been studied through an explicitly critical disability studies lens. In fact, several of the arguments cited above replicate ableist ideology by figuring injury and disability as solely negative aspects of social identities that might be recovered from. This is all the more reason that when we talk about race and gender, we must attend to how they form and inform each other in relation to disability—both in the form of violent impositions of impairment and in the form of the stigmatization of bodies. The disability aspect of gender and racial formations is often hidden via ableist ideologies that pressure bodies not marked as disabled to not recognize or identify with the stigma of disability. It is also often hidden via racist ideologies that mark white bodies as safe from and bodies of color as vulnerable to social violence and impairment, thus normalizing certain forms of disablement. Finally, it is hidden via dominant gender ideologies that associate some mental, emotional, and physical disabilities with normative gender embodiment—for example, emotional pain or instability might be read as a sign of normative womanhood, rather than as a disability. Despite their sometimes ableist assumption that disability or impairment is inherently negative, the texts cited above do address ways that race and gender are processes of disablement. I read against the grain of the ableist assumption that we want to be free of disability, while at the same time acknowledging the inseparability of injury, disablement, race, and gender to which such work points. Becoming
more aware of the ways racialized disgender functions not only nuances our understanding of racism and (cis)sexism but also can help us to perceive the effects of ableism on our bodies and identities, thereby making us all more effective and engaged advocates for a less ableist society.

To explore this mutual constitution of race and gender via disability, I turn to Hortense Spillers’s “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” and bell hooks’s The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love. I choose these texts in part as an acknowledgment of the impact of intersectional Black feminisms to the concept of racialized disgender, in part because of their long-standing impact on critical race and gender studies, and in part because each has been taken up as a key text for exploration by contemporary scholars in disability studies working on the relationship between gender, race, and disability, albeit to slightly different ends. Spillers’s and hooks’s essays together provide an outline for ways of thinking about how power uses physical/mental/emotional impairment and ideologies of ableism to constitute racial and gender identities in the United States. They also point to the fact that the ways we conceptualize normative bodies are inextricable from historical racial and gender formations. And they provide some orientation for navigating the ethical dilemma of claiming identities created in violence without replicating or celebrating the violence itself.

In Spillers’s “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” she notes that a primary form of dispossession resulting from chattel slavery was “the loss of gender.” This fact necessitates an “altered reading of gender” for Black men and women in the United States (77). Spillers’s argument is that the history of human captivity and enslavement on which the United States’ culture and economy was founded created a gendering outside of dominant patriarchal understandings of maleness and femaleness for Black Americans. The “social-political order of the New World,” argues Spillers, denied normative gender possibilities to Black Americans via “actual mutilation, dismemberment, and exile” (67). That is, the category of racial Blackness was constructed through the ungendering of bodies that occurred through imposed and unwanted physical impairment and the related stigmatizing and dehumanizing of the disabled and desexed body.

Erevelles argues that Spillers’s “essay is as much about disability as it is about race” in that it reveals that “it is precisely at the historical moment when one class of human being was transformed into cargo to be transported to the New World that black bodies become disabled and disabled bodies become black” (40). Erevelles insightfully traces the unnamed but continually present concept of disability in Spillers’s essay, concluding that the “markings on the flesh” that begin under slavery “produce impairment” on
Black bodies such that it becomes almost impossible to “claim the sovereign subject, now mutually constituted via race, disability, and gender as a dehumanized commodity” (44). Erevelles uses this reading to stress an attentiveness to the ways that racial Blackness has been constructed via violent impairment-creating practices that turn the Black disabled body into a commodity, and therefore to problematize poststructuralist and disability studies rhetorics that celebrate the deconstruction of the subject as inherently emancipating or transgressive.

I too want to resist patterns of depathologizing disability that turn immediately and only to a celebration of disability as difference or resistance. However, I approach this not so much by situating the cocreation of race, gender, and disability in transnational capitalism and the exchange of bodies as commodity as by thinking about the ways this cocreation has situated our current politics and possibilities for conceptualizing a future. In Erevelles’s reading, gender is “stripped” from enslaved Black bodies, and it is this “erasure of gender” that enabled the impairment of the Black female body. While Spillers does suggest that gender disappears in the Middle Passage and becomes reinscribed as a site of commodification rather than the subject-enabling identity that maleness and femaleness are in our society, she also suggests at the end of her essay that there is room for a reclaiming by Black men and women of the identities this historical dissolution has created. While the history of violence done to Black bodies via the Middle Passage and the institution of chattel slavery is impossible to reclaim in and of itself as a site for celebration, transgression, or emancipation, the effects of such a history do, in fact, offer up a possibility for reclamation. At the very least, Spillers suggests, there is the possibility of “claiming” the inheritances of this history, not to reify or celebrate trauma and violence, but to “make a place for” the Black female body as one that is gendered outside the “traditional symbolics of female gender” such that a claiming of this “monstrosity”—that is, a female body that is not subject to patriarchal norms—“might rewrite . . . a radically different text for female empowerment” (80). What Spillers points out as an “un-gendering” of flesh does not result in a complete lack of gender, but rather offers us a historical reading of how racial disgendering functions. Gender, race, and disability are all historically and inseparably structured, such that all genders, all racial identities, and all dis/ability statuses are created in relation to one another. There is no true and preexisting gender that is stripped from Black female bodies, even as the way that those bodies experienced dehumanization and commodification happened through denying them legibility within dominant symbolics of maleness and femaleness. Rather, those bodies come to experience their gendering via the historical imposition of extreme violence.
While Spillers is most invested in exploring how this history impacts current (mis)understandings of the power and marginalization of Black women, she attends, as well, to how this history has created Black manhood, white womanhood, and even white manhood. Spillers argues that chattel slavery and its work in the creation of racialized gender create Black men as the “only American community of males” who have the potential to know “the female within itself” (80). She suggests that white women’s racialized gender was formed in relation to “the same fabric of dread and humiliation” as Black women’s, though to very different ends (77). And in her statement that “‘sexuality’ as a term of implied relationship and desire, is dubiously appropriate . . . to any of the familial arrangements under a system of enslavement, from the master’s family to the captive enclave,” I would suggest that Spillers at least gestures toward the fact that the racialized gender of slave masters was also constructed in relation to violent practices of disablement and human commodification (76).

In my expansion of Spillers’s critique to all bodies under slavery, I want to continue to highlight the specific violences done to Black female bodies but also to suggest that her framework for understanding how the Middle Passage and chattel slavery constructed race, gender, and dis/ability as interdependent and nationally and historically specific categories can be applied to the construction of all identities formed out of these historical violences. Here I understand myself as working in alignment with Crenshaw’s conception of intersectionality—that it is created specifically to address the multiple marginalization of Black women, and that in examining that marginalization it offers a framework for understanding power and its effects more broadly.14

One might take issue with this expansion on the grounds that intersectionality has been theorized as the intersections of oppressions and marginalizations and that Spillers is specifically talking about racial and gender identities constructed as the Other to the full subjectivity of white maleness. This is where bell hooks’s The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love, a foundational text for current work in men and masculinity studies that perceive manhood as impairing men’s bodies, can offer us additional insight. Here hooks forwards the reading that men have been just as traumatized and disabled by patriarchy as women and that if feminism cannot understand and incorporate this fact, it cannot work to end the cycle of violence that is men’s domination of women. Itself imbedded in ableist language, hooks’s reading is not informed by a disability studies approach. This becomes clear in her use of the term “emotional cripples” to describe what happens to men under patriarchy, as well as her conclusion that in order to attend to the “self-mutilation” that patriarchy requires, we must “reunite[e] the severed parts” (27, 66). Thus, hooks uses language suggesting that disability is something
wholly negative and takes a medical model approach that understands it as in need of rehabilitation or repair.

Sami Schalk has pointed to how hooks’s metaphor must either be read as ableist—implies that disability is “a negative, anti-relational state of injury and brokenness,” or as antifeminist—that men have a disability and thus their world and environment need to be more accommodating of their violent expressions of love, thereby “shift[ing] the focus away from patriarchy as a damaging system of oppression” (“Metaphorically” n.p.). I want to offer another possible reading here, which goes against the grain of hooks’s ableist framework but not necessarily against her overall point. What if we read hooks less metaphorically and we accept her diagnosis but not her ableist prescription for treatment? In other words, what if we read her argument not as a metaphor for what patriarchy does to men but as a literal description of mental/emotional impairment that is the result of the workings of (cis)sexism on all bodies? Schalk suggests that a disability studies approach would not place the responsibility to change on the disabled person, but rather on their environment. Schalk here is referring to the social model of disability in which disability can be attended to entirely by changing the environment. As other disability studies scholars have noted, however, a person with a disability may experience pain, fatigue, and mortality, which are not necessarily alleviated by changing the environment. A diagnosis of mental illness can be a way to situate and respond to psychic pain. A person with a disability might want regular and affordable access to medical care, even if they do not want or align themselves with a medical model that puts the problem of disability in their body. Using a disability studies perspective that takes a more complex approach to embodiment, one might read hooks as suggesting, along similar lines to Spillers and Erevelles, that gender identity is formed in relation to violence, in this case a psychic violence targeting men, that results in disability. Rather than taking hooks’s approach to curing the disability by fixing the men, what if we accepted racialized disgender as inherently part of the formation of our social identities, including manhood, and both tried to decrease that violence and to think about men having access to knowledge about power through the ways they have experienced disability. A disability studies perspective used in this way might help us to perceive patriarchy as a damaging system of oppression that recreates itself though disablement, and to understand the effects of that disablement to be the formation of gender identities that are both wounded and valuable sites for knowledge production and political change. This might allow people who identify as able-bodied men to perceive their own liberation in the work of disability studies as well as in feminist thinking.

My reading of hooks here suggests, like my reading of Spillers, that social
identities as we know them originate in the impairment and disabling of bodies along identity lines, including but not limited to race and gender. While the ideologies around which bodies are marked as disabled differs along racial and gendered lines, the concept of racialized disgender helps us to talk about ways that disability is both socially constructed and lived in the body and that racial, gender, and disability identities are aspects of the self that one might take great pride in, while simultaneously being lived as a material embodiment that may involve impairment, pain, and unwanted bodymind limitations. Understanding racialized disgender as an inescapable part of the embodied experiences of all U.S. subjects offers a possibility for claiming, rather than trying to fix or distance oneself from, these impaired and disabled racialized genders. Such a claiming might constitute an act of inclusion that could take us into a disabled future in which we do not need to fix the harm done by these histories so much as to learn to live with it in a way that does not replicate its history of physical, emotional, and psychological violence.

Selection of Texts and Chapter Overview

This book discusses “race,” “gender,” and “dis/ability” as categories produced by systemic apparatuses of power, rather than looking at a specific historical articulation of a racial, gender, or disability identity or formation. It addresses whiteness, Jewishness, Chicanidad/Mexican Americanness, and Blackness; cisgender manhood and womanhood; characters with and without socially marked disability; and straight and queer sexualities. It does not address Native American, Asian American, Muslim American, or other racial and ethnic identities in the United States, nor does it address any texts with transgender, intersex, or nonbinary characters. This is not a function of these identity categories; each could certainly be read through the lens of racialized disgender. Rather, it is a result of choosing texts that usefully illuminate and/or challenge the mutual construction of race, gender, and dis/ability in the United States. The identities of the authors and characters themselves are less important for inclusion here than the ways they parse the intersections between race, gender, and dis/ability.

There are certainly limitations to this approach. Using a wide lens means touching down in various places for theoretical illustrations, without being able to attend in depth to a single genealogy of identity formation. It also means discussing representations of some identities and not others, as well as a focus on identifications I both do and do not share. This approach risks trying to cover too much ground and not being attentive to the depth of the
effects of intersections of power on a specific population or community. Nevertheless, the formulation of racialized disgender is an important addition to the work currently being done that focuses on specific racial, ethnic, dis/ability, and gender formations. If we are to conceptualize useful tools for dismantling intersectional systems of power, we need ways to look at such systems in relation to one another and understand that, while able to shift over time, they have deep interlocking historical intersections. We are at a disadvantage in making any substantive social change if we cannot be simultaneously aware of both the specificities of each historical moment and each identity position and the broader ways the systems of power that construct those identities interrelate and hide their deep historical interrelations.

Throughout this book, I use the term “racialized disgender” to describe representations of bodies in a twofold manner. “Racialized disgendering” refers to (1) bodies that are physically, intellectually, or emotionally impaired or socially disabled by the process of racialized gendering and (2) bodies that are legible as being physically, intellectually, or emotionally impaired or socially disabled by the process of racialized gendering, often in combination with a socially designated status of illness or disability. All subjects in a U.S. context are racially disgendered in the first sense. The second category becomes important because bodies that fall into that category—those that have a disability or illness legible as outside what is considered the physical, cognitive, or emotional norm in our society—often have the epistemic and positional privilege of making the processes of racialized disgendering more legible. Thus, while all subjects are racially disgendered, representations of those subjects that experience ableism directly can be richer sites to mine for a broader understanding of how racialized disgender works. Chapters 2 and 3 of this text focus on representations of the latter category, while Chapters 1 and 4 look at speculative futures in which disability, race, and gender are used to conservative and radical ends, respectively.

Chapter 1, “White Guys in Wheelchairs: Lost, Avatar, and the Appropriation of Disability,” analyzes the television series Lost (2004–2010) and the film Avatar (2009), to interrogate the function of whiteness within dominant narratives of disability. This chapter is specifically attentive to how visual representations of white American men in (and out) of wheelchairs figure as sites to mark the metaphorically disabled white man in a multicultural world, to appropriate the position of minoritized identity from race- and gender-based politics and political discourses, and to imagine a recuperation or rehabilitation of white masculinity via female and nonwhite bodies. Such representations of white men with mobility impairments appropriate the position of social marginality via a temporary physical dis-
ability, which can be used to identify with and gain recognition from women and people of color, to engage viewer sympathy, and then to reclaim a healed white manhood through the narrative repair of their physical disability. Both *Lost* and *Avatar* use representations of white men in wheelchairs to draw on popular cultural fears and assumptions about the loss of the patriarchal authority of able-bodied cis male white manhood. This loss is then assuaged via speculative narratives of futures or alternate presents that “give back” bodily power to white male heroes. Such narratives not only limit imaginative political possibilities for valuing disability identity and intersectional politics; they also draw on and potentially reinforce a criticism of early strains of disability studies itself—that it was focused on, written by, and tailored to the needs of white men with physical disabilities. This chapter looks at how the racial disgendering of white cis males, rather than being claimed as a disabled identity, uses disability as a prop to envision a future free of disability for white men. In this way, the chapter provides a backdrop against which to read the work of the late twentieth- to early twenty-first-century authors, engaged in Chapters 2–4, who build frameworks for understanding disability as an inherent and valued part of our shared futures.

Chapter 2, “Embodied Metaphor and Nonreproductive Futurity as Racialized Disgender in Islas and Moraga,” looks at Arturo Islas and Cherríe Moraga, queer Chicana/o writers who have traditionally been thought of as having radically differing politics around social identity. I argue that Islas and Moraga use metaphor in relation to representations of disabled characters (Mama Chona and Miguel in Islas, and Cerezita in Moraga) to construct similar approaches to rethinking Chicana/o identity and family models in relation to disability and queer sexuality. I also begin to delve more deeply into the value of racialized disgender as a political model, particularly in relation to identity and futurity. Islas’s and Moraga’s literary works do not set up a straight future-oriented versus queer antifuture dichotomy but rather look at how our futures are already disabled and how that understanding can produce less restrictive futures, particularly for those with marginalized racial, ethnic, and sexual identities.

Chapter 3, “Racialized Disgender and Disruptive Futurity in Lorde’s and Engelberg’s Cancer Narratives,” looks at intersections of race, gender, and disability in the work of Audre Lorde and Miriam Engelberg, examining how representations of disability might help us expand recent work in disability theory on the politics of what Lennard Davis calls “caring about” the body (28). A politics of caring about the body, I argue, involves attention to the rights, treatment, and oppression of disabled, nonnormative, and ill bodies, and thus would require greater attentiveness to the racially disgendering ways our bodies’ histories and social narratives disable us as well as the ways
these narratives contextualize and affect the experience of disability and illness. This chapter not only examines the ways in which breast cancer is a gendered and gendering disease but also provides close readings illustrating that breast cancer’s social functioning and the rhetorics that have been used to make it less threatening to dominant understandings of both race and gender can reveal how racialized gender functions as a form of disability more broadly.

Chapter 4, “Speculative Disabled Futures: Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* Trilogy,” looks to the science fiction of Octavia Butler for a narrative model that inverts that of *Lost* and *Avatar* by reconfiguring the hero as one with an alternate wounded history—that of Black motherhood that carries legacies of slavery, forced reproduction, and lack of legal agency in relation to the health of oneself and one’s children. Lilith’s Black womanhood is represented by Butler as embodied racialized disgender, both enabling her to survive into the future and also rooted in an inherited history of wounds. Butler’s trilogy suggests that it is from the knowledge we can cull from our racially disgendered identities that we might build tools for survival and adaptability. It reveals that a sustainable ethics of caring about bodies requires that we not only accept but expect and even on some level appreciate pain, disability, and painful memories as part of our temporal future, a future that looks neither to perfectibility of bodies nor to full redemption from our social and political pasts.

I conclude with a Coda that interrogates some of my personal experiences over the course of the writing of this book to position myself as author and embodied person in relation to an intersectional understanding of race, gender, and disability and to argue that this conscious positioning is essential to framing work in disability studies as well as to narrating one’s decisions in relation to both academic and medical institutional forces. I envision the sketches in the Coda as a series of situational possibilities for imagining allyship as practiced in relation to an understanding of the workings of racialized disgender as I have articulated them in my literary analyses. I look to these moments of potential allyship to experiment with ways of thinking about moving toward a more inclusive sense of futurity in which we can hold awareness of a traumatic past and its impacts alongside a revaluing of the disabilities such a past may have created.

At the center of each analysis throughout this book is a desire to unpack how disability as both a concept and a lived bodily experience has constructed race and gender and how race and gender have historically intersected (both within dominant discourses of power and within narratives of resistance) to create and define disability. My hope for this project is not that it will give us an entirely new way of thinking of the complexly intertwined
structures of ableism, racism, and (cis)sexism so much as that it will help build a coalitional politics by opening up different ways of talking about some of their workings. There is more to say about the intersectionality of whiteness and woundedness, disability and gender normativity, and racial nonwhiteness and the social and physical creation of nonnormative bodies than this text can address. I write with the understanding that there are gaps in my understanding and with the hope that the discourse those gaps produce will prove generative for my own and others’ thinking.