

Introduction

In an unusual series of more than thirty video interviews posted to YouTube in 2012, young disabled Africans offer revealing accounts of their personal experience and outlook. Called the African Youth with Disabilities Network, the videos feature interviewees who frequently recount societal prejudice, barriers to education, and dealing with a lack of resources.¹ For example, Nicolette Pieters, a mobility-impaired woman from Namibia, states that her primary school had no ramps, so classmates had to carry her up the stairs; she was so poor during college that she sometimes foraged through trash bins for food. Robert Ssewagudde, a deaf man from Uganda, reports that people in his home area perceived him as stupid and looked at him “like I was nothing” until his mother sent him away to a school for deaf students, where he found an empowering community of sign language users. Other interviewees talk about how society sometimes hid disabled children; remark on sexual violence against disabled women, especially in war zones; and address how disability can overlap with local cultural traditions such as female genital mutilation. Despite such challenges, or because of them, all the interviewees express firm dedication to serving as advocates for disability rights. “Every child has the right to go to school,” Lawrence Mute, a blind Kenyan, asserts. One is struck not just by the obstacles the interviewees face, but also by their humanity, energy, and commitment to making the world a more just place for disabled Africans.

The videos are also notable for the way they give a direct voice to Black disabled people in the Global South, which does not happen often. While

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disabled people everywhere have dealt with barriers to making their views known, those in the Global South, who are usually people of color, have long been largely unheard, despite numbering more than half a billion people.² Like other socially and politically disempowered people in the Global South—one thinks of groups such as refugees, migrants, and orphans—they have often been voiceless in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s terms and anonymous in public discourse. As Nirmala Erevelles has pointed out, disabled people in the Global South are hidden from view in media in the North: “Third-world disabled people . . . face the social, political, and economic implications of being invisible,” she says (*Disability* 133). Such invisibility underscores how disabled people and those close to them in the Global South have commonly been afterthoughts, deemed unimportant and disposable.

The disregard for disabled people in the Global South unfortunately has become even more pronounced during recent nativism in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, and other countries in the North. This nationalist wave is typically built on grievances against immigrants and refugees (usually of color) from other places. Even before the disastrous coronavirus pandemic, accompanying economic distress, and outcry for racial justice, U.S. President Donald Trump’s “America First” slogan epitomized how his administration increasingly turned the country inward, embracing walls and immigration restrictions and discounting others. In 2020, his administration’s heavy-handed response to largely peaceful protests for racial justice even drew a warning from the United Nations Human Rights Office (O’Grady).³ Human rights around the world—the notion that all people deserve to live lives of dignity free of abuse—were not a priority.

Yet as is often the case when leaders pursue misguided policies, the humanities—and, specifically, literature in this case—offer an important if gentle corrective. Disabled people are definitely not invisible in prominent postcolonial literature in English, where they regularly have a compelling presence. *Elusive Kinship* takes on the proliferation of disabled characters in this fiction, a topic that is ripe for inquiry. It shows that since the mid-twentieth century, and especially since 1980, figures of disability occupy central places in work by celebrated authors such as Chinua Achebe, Salman Rushdie, J. M. Coetzee, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Edwidge Danticat, and others, and that such representations do important cultural work.

This study has several overlapping aims. I seek, first, to enhance our appreciation of key texts in the Anglophone postcolonial literature of the Global South by uncovering the myriad ways they gain energy, vitality, and metaphoric force from characters with extraordinary bodies or minds. At the same time, *Elusive Kinship* explores how this work confirms, challenges, or expands

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on existing theories of disability in literature developed in North America and Western Europe, nudging us toward a fuller understanding of disability worldwide. Moreover, I view this corpus through a human rights lens, showing how it depicts injustice with disabled characters and raises awareness of human rights. Finally, I argue that the works increasingly help to create connection and care for disabled people in readers' imaginations—what I call “kinship” in the title—that are a crucial first step to achieving meaningful disability human rights in the world, even if some fiction implicitly cautions that human rights alone are not enough for justice. As suggested by the titular “elusive,” such connection is not direct or consistent, but it does seem to happen and deserves attention.

Because 80 percent of the world's disabled people live in so-called developing countries (Stein “Disability” 76), disability is much more common in the Global South than in the North (although, as Helen Meekosha and Jasbir Puar argue and I discuss below, the North has played a decisive role in creating disability in the South). So in one sense it is not surprising that disability often turns up in this literature. Yet authors are not just reflecting reality; they also deploy characters with exceptional bodies to advance a countless number of topics. From the one-legged woman associated with the Igbo clan's formidable war medicine in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) to Coetzee's cognitively disabled Michael traversing a war-torn South Africa in *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), from Saleem's incredible telepathic nose and cracking body in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) to My Luck, the boy soldier who has had his vocal cords severed in Chris Abani's *Song for Night* (2007), from the beloved Haitian American sister's missing forearm in Danticat's story “Caroline's Wedding” (1996) to Animal, the exuberant boy in India who has a bent spine and goes around on all fours as a result of a chemical plant disaster in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007), notable Anglophone literature from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean frequently depicts, and seems structured around, memorable characters with impairment.

Although these representations are quite varied and heterogeneous, collectively they make disabled people in the Global South more visible and significant. I should clarify that I am not suggesting that such depictions substitute for disabled people speaking for themselves. For starters, the authors are mostly nondisabled (as far as I know). Still, these representations, even magical realist ones, provide powerful witnessing. They allow the reading public to traverse seemingly vast distances (whether geographic, cultural, or chronological or related to differences in race, class, gender, or disability status) and connect with others through their imaginations, which leading human rights advocates have seen as important. As Samuel Moyn points out in his well-

TABLE I.1. CHRONOLOGY OF FICTION IN THIS STUDY AND
 MAJOR HUMAN RIGHTS TREATIES

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Year	Major International UN Human Rights Declarations and Treaties	Fiction in This Book Published	UN Disability Events, Declarations, and Treaties
1948	Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) for “all human beings”		
1958		Chinua Achebe, <i>Things Fall Apart</i>	
1960	Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples		
1965	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination		
1971	Declaration on the Rights of Mentally Retarded Persons		Declaration on the Rights of Mentally Retarded Persons
1975	Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons		Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons
1979	Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)		
1981		Salman Rushdie, <i>Midnight’s Children</i>	International Year of Disabled Persons
1982			World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons
1983		J. M. Coetzee, <i>Life & Times of Michael K</i>	
1983–1992			Decade of Disabled Persons
1984	Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment		
1989	Convention on the Rights of the Child		
1990	Convention on Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Their Families		
1991			General recommendation 18 to the CEDAW asks nation-states to report on status of disabled women
1993			UN adopts Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities

1994		Edwidge Danticat, <i>Breath, Eyes, Memory</i>	UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights adopts General Comment on Persons with Disabilities
1995		Edwidge Danticat, "Caroline's Wedding"	
1999		J. M. Coetzee, <i>Disgrace</i> ; Anita Desai, <i>Fasting, Feasting</i> ; Jhumpa Lahiri, "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar"	
2004		Chris Abani, <i>GraceLand</i>	
2006	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities		Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
2007		Chris Abani, <i>Song for Night</i> ; Indra Sinha, <i>Animal's People</i>	
2015		Petina Gappah, <i>The Book of Memory</i>	

regarded history of human rights, *The Last Utopia*, in the 1960s human rights activists recognized that a crucial initial step in the ascension of human rights in general was not laws or treaties but winning people's "imagination, first and foremost" (5, emphasis added). Imagination is, of course, a realm of fiction: by compelling readers to engage with physical, sensory, and cognitive difference in their minds, the literature of the Global South often directs attention to disability and makes it human, relatable, and exciting in ways that cold statistics do not. (For a chronology of when the fiction covered in this study was published vis-à-vis human rights initiatives, see Table I.1). By depicting an oppressed group that too often is left out of conversations about rights, such works have significant consequences not just for this corpus and narrative theory, and not just for global power dynamics and a host of other subjects, but also for the actual lived experience of disabled people in the Global South.

Theoretical Background

With this focus, *Elusive Kinship* seeks to bring together three dynamic interdisciplinary fields: postcolonial studies, studies of human rights and literature, and literary disability studies. While the former two have had important and rewarding exchanges, they have both largely bypassed disability. First, disability and postcolonial studies have developed largely independently over the past several decades. In disability studies, scholarly explorations of the roles of disability in Euro-American literature have flourished, emphasizing a non-

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pathological and liberatory approach.⁴ But the prominence of disability in the Anglophone literature of the Global South has only recently begun to receive notice. Concurrently, while postcolonial scholars have made many incisive and valuable interventions in literature about oppressed people in former European colonies, they have not had much to say about disability. When they do comment on it, they have tended to focus on metaphoric meanings, choosing not to engage with the material presence of disability in the text or connections to actual disabled people (Hall *Literature* 50). In *Relocating Postcolonialism* (2002), Ato Quayson and David Theo Goldberg note that “the potential theoretical overlaps” between postcolonial studies and disability studies are “quite immense” and call for the two fields to work together. “It is necessary to pursue joint projects of agitation for justice that would embrace the disabled equally with the racially ordered, gendered, and postcolonial subject,” they write, not only affirming disability studies scholars’ contention that disability is an identity category that should be placed alongside race, class, and gender, but also adding postcolonial status to the mix (xvii). Both postcolonial theory and disability studies are about power; they concern populations that are oppressed and typically disenfranchised. Disabled people collectively remain one of the most vulnerable populations in the world. How does literature imaginatively begin to counteract the situation by giving disabled characters a more visible, consequential presence in the public imagination?

A few pioneering studies on disability in literature about the Global South have recently indicated how fertile this area is for inquiry. Quayson published *Aesthetic Nervousness* (2007), which explores disability in Coetzee’s and Wole Soyinka’s work alongside literature by prominent European and American authors. He contends that these literary treatments of disability from disparate places work on a multiplicity of levels, creating an anxiety not just between characters, but also between texts and readers, leading to what he calls a crisis of representation. In the first book-length study of the topic, *Postcolonial Fiction and Disability* (2011), Clare Barker contests the notion of a narrative crisis. She argues that portrayals of child disabled characters in literature from Zimbabwe, Nigeria, India, Pakistan, and Māori New Zealand serve as both metaphoric critiques of “dominant (post)colonial or national ideologies” and empathetic depictions of disabled experience (26). For his part, Michael Bérubé, in *The Secret Life of Stories* (2016), discusses intellectual disability as a narrative force in Coetzee’s fiction alongside that of select Western writers and filmmakers. Journals have devoted special issues to the subject.⁵ More broadly, disability scholars as varied as Michael Davidson, Nirmala Erevelles, Eunjung Kim, Shaun Grech, Julie Avril Minich, and Jas-

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bir Puar have advanced disability theory on a transnational level in recent years, while anthropologists such as Benedicte Ingstad and Susan Reynolds Whyte have published on disability in local and global contexts.⁶

Alongside such developments, the project contributes to a third nascent field: studies of human rights and literature. Inaugurated by such scholars as Joseph Slaughter, James Dawes, and Elizabeth Anker, this field emerged around 2007 and has grown since then, calling attention to the relationship of literature to rights abuses around the world, although it, too, has had little to say about disabled people to date.⁷ Slaughter points out that, through its emphasis on the individual in society, fiction (and in his case especially the bildungsroman, or coming-of-age novel) and human rights are mutually reinforcing ideological constructs that work toward the same ends, addressing individuals' relationship to their societies. Scholars in the field use human rights as an analytic lens with literary works, contending that fictional works can forcefully reveal and testify to rights issues. As Pramod Nayar puts it, "Literature . . . offers a key route into the very idea of the human and insights into those excluded from this idea" (v)—illumination that, he maintains, legal discourse and political commentary alone do not adequately provide. He cites a range of commentators who agree.

Yet while acknowledging the value of bringing literary studies and human rights together, critics have pointed out that doing so is not easy or straightforward, especially because of the contradictory nature of human rights. Dawes and others have pointed to paradoxes underlying rights or how they are problematic or even complicit with global power structures and corruption. Although human rights as promulgated by the United Nations strive to be universal, pertaining to all people wherever they are, a fundamental contradiction is that those rights depend on nation-states for enforcement, and those nation-states may themselves be human rights violators. Moreover, Michael Freeman acknowledges the fear some people have that the promotion of human rights as universal might lead to the hegemony of dominant world powers (121). Some have associated rights with neocolonialism or global capitalism, another component of the current world order that often leaves people behind.

Reading literature carefully can make these difficult contradictions clearer and allow us to explore them. For his part, Dawes has pointed out that, to address human rights violations, we need to tell stories about them to make them known, but such stories raise vexing questions about how to narrate the unspeakable, who has the authority to write them, and the danger of retraumatizing survivors by telling their stories. In addition, according to Elizabeth

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Swanson Goldberg and Alexandra Schultheis Moore, scholarship in the field is characterized by an “aura of contestation,” as well as by “a deep desire for social justice” (1). Though typically critics have taken on literature depicting gross violations such as torture, genocide, and violence to probe the relationship between narrative and human rights, Nick Mansfield points out that even fictional representation of the seemingly everyday can have significance in this area. “Literature’s most valuable contribution to human rights discourse comes . . . from domains where rights may not be mentioned or even recognized as an issue,” Mansfield says, an observation that applies to this study as most of the works it discusses do not explicitly refer to rights (213).

The field’s goal of social justice and dignity for all people clearly converges with the aims of both disability studies and postcolonial studies, yet so far disability has been mostly overlooked by scholars working in human rights and literature. A few recent exceptions exist. Crystal Parikh gestures toward disability in her discussion of wellness toward the end of *Writing Human Rights* (2017); Moore brings it into “‘Disaster Capitalism’ and Human Rights,” her chapter on Sinha’s *Animal’s People*; and the *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* had a special issue on disability and human rights in 2017 (Greco and Di Giovanni), publications that hint at what a deserving and rewarding area of inquiry this can be.

Methodology and Argument

Building on such groundbreaking work, *Elusive Kinship* puts these three fields into conversation with one another. After exploring the idea of connection between readers and characters more in the next chapter, I proceed in largely chronological fashion, starting with Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* at the mid-twentieth century and working into twenty-first-century literature, the better to show how these literary depictions evolved and their striking relation to emerging international disability human rights instruments during the same period. Instead of trying to cover all disability aspects in each work, I focus on those features that seem especially prominent and significant.

These provocative representations add unruly energy and meaning to their stories in ways reminiscent of David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder’s influential theory of narrative prosthesis. They trenchantly show how Euro-American literature often depends on disability as a device to inaugurate and move narratives forward. As Mitchell and Snyder put it, disability frequently appears as an “interruptive force” and adds “disruptive punch” to texts, phrases that certainly describe depictions of disability in the literature of the Global South in English too (*Narrative Prosthesis* 48–49). According to the theory of nar-

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rative prosthesis, typically disability is removed at the end of Euro-American narratives, ultimately shoring up some notion of normalcy elsewhere, a removal, as I show, that we can sometimes find in narratives of the Global South. However, Mitchell and Snyder have refined the theory over the years. In *The Biopolitics of Disability* (2015), they state that, if modernity sought to eradicate impairments, the postmodern neoliberal age stresses “*exceptionality*,” where disabled bodies are made into sites of “*cultural rehabilitation*,” profitability, and normativization (205). Some literary disability scholars have critiqued this analysis extensively, and we could add in depictions in postcolonial literature here. Although in works from the Global South disabled characters certainly are exceptional, they are almost never rehabilitated; in fact, Saleem Sinai in *Midnight’s Children* depicts medical intervention as damaging and Animal in *Animal’s People* explicitly rejects medical treatment at the end. Especially since 1990, disability in this literature is often not eliminated or rehabilitated. It just remains at the conclusion, which seems to add another twist to Mitchell and Snyder’s theory.

Along these lines, I also strive to examine how such representations relate to existing theories of disability in literature that were developed in North America and Europe. As scholars have pointed out, Euro-American understandings of such concepts as autonomy, normalcy, and minority identity cannot simply be exported and applied to locations in the Global South that have distinct cultures and histories. Pushpa Naidu Parekh, for instance, calls for theoretical “re-visioning” in global contexts to analyze “historical and cultural-specific meanings of disability” (150). Added to this need is the complication that cultures usually contain more than one view of disability, which may well show up in fiction. Due to the accelerated forms of human movement and contact associated with globalization and migration since World War II, not to mention the current era of social media and technological connectivity, attitudes in any given culture toward disability are not necessarily uniform but may be intermixed and in dialogue with one another. To make matters even more complicated, almost all of the authors under consideration here could be called transnational, with experience living in both the South and the North. Accordingly, I try to practice the kind of “situated critical reading practices” that Clare Barker and Stuart Murray advocate, which attend as far as possible to the nuances of specific local situations (228). In the process, I endeavor to place each work in its historical context. Well aware of the Euro-American tendency to display cultural arrogance in such matters, I do not pretend such a task is an easy enterprise, but I do think it is an important one. Mindful of what Jean and John L. Comaroff call the “polymorphous, mutating ensemble of signs and practices” of modernity in Africa

and, by extension, throughout the Global South, I take the rich, inventive literature itself as my main guide (7).

Finally, *Elusive Kinship* argues that dynamic postcolonial literature often helps to create the imaginative connection required to implement meaningful human rights and justice for disabled people. Instead of just producing a victims' literature of passive suffering or outrage, authors occasionally use figures of disability to create something innovative and surprising, something that, while testifying to the agonizing harms initiated by colonialism and global capitalism, or destructive abuses originating in the home nation-state, indicates disabled people's worth and humanity. Again, not all such literature conveys this value: depictions vary widely and are multifarious and even contradictory. Nonetheless, some influential instances affirming the value and dignity of disabled people exist. Moreover, this literature sometimes offers a meaningful bond between reader and disabled character. As I discuss more in the next chapter, such works subtly uphold compassion, connection, and mutual dependence in the face of vulnerability and oppression, which coincides with the arguments for global disability rights and for the capabilities that, Martha Nussbaum asserts in *Frontiers of Justice* (2006), all people deserve, whether they can reciprocate or not.

In making this argument, I might seem to follow a view articulated by scholars such as Lynn Hunt that links the evolution of the novel with the evolution of human rights by stressing literature's capacity to promote sentiment and humanitarian feeling. However, such sympathy historically has not extended to disabled people. Elizabeth Anker points out that Enlightenment-based liberalism often imagines a person with rights as invariably possessing a body that is "whole, autonomous, and self-enclosed" (*Fictions* 3).⁸ Euro-American canonical literature, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, generally reflects this attitude. As disability studies scholars such as Lennard J. Davis and Mitchell and Snyder have shown, it typically has marginalized disability while upholding notions of normalcy. Contemporary postcolonial literature in English adds to its vitality by emphasizing disabled people's experiences and often making them central to postcolonial existence. By pointing this out, *Elusive Kinship* seeks to bring disability more forcefully to the critical conversation on the relationship between human rights and literature.

The Move to Global Disability Rights

The situation of disabled people in the Global South is a real issue. They are among the world's most disenfranchised citizens. In *Disability and Poverty*:

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A Global Challenge, Arne H. Eide and Benedicte Ingstad emphasize what scholars have long recognized as the “vicious circle” that often connects disability and indigence, in which disability leads to poverty and poverty leads to disability, reinforcing each other (1). While most nations of the Global South are disproportionately poorer than their counterparts in the North, their disabled citizens typically endure “poverty within poverty”: they have limited access to health care and housing and are among the first to perish from food shortages, natural disasters, and other emergencies (3). Persistent problems include not just widespread hardship, but also the fact that disabled people everywhere are often perceived as useless and unable to reciprocate adequately for benefits they may receive. In the Global South they have much less access to education, employment, and social activities. A very low percentage of disabled children in these areas receive schooling at all (Stein “Disability” 76). Disabled women and girls are especially vulnerable. While reliable statistics can be hard to come by, some researchers estimate that literacy rates for women with disabilities globally may be as low as 1 percent; moreover, disabled women are more often the victims of violence (including rape and domestic abuse) (UN “Women”). Contextual conditions beyond people’s control shape these distressing circumstances, including the destructive legacies of colonialism, war and internecine conflict, and prevailing neoliberal ideologies that favor free-market transnational corporate practices and in effect perpetuate an enormous gap between very rich and extremely poor people.⁹ The novel coronavirus pandemic that is currently unfolding will almost certainly add to this precarity, creating millions more disabled people in poverty, for again disabled people are typically among the first victims of disasters.

The encouraging news is that disability is finally on the world’s agenda, a transformation that, *Elusive Kinship* argues, Anglophone postcolonial literature helped to bring about. Since the 1970s, the United Nations has gradually undertaken a series of increasingly forceful initiatives aimed at improving the situation of disabled people across the globe (see Table I.1). Such efforts culminated in the United Nations’ landmark Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), adopted in 2006 and ratified in 2008, which has sought to ensure the worth of disabled people everywhere. The CRPD’s guiding principles include respecting the dignity of disabled people, nondiscrimination, access, and effective participation and full inclusion in society (UN “Guiding”). Unlike most other United Nations human rights treaties, with the CRPD, the stakeholders—disabled people—were directly involved in negotiations, in keeping with the international disability rights slogan “Nothing About Us Without Us.”¹⁰ Although most of these disabled

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participants did come from the North in the period leading up to the convention, probably because of travel costs (Stein “China” 16), communities organized on a global scale using social media and other virtual technologies, showing worldwide engagement (Meekosha 679). The CRPD helped unite the global disability community. As of 2020, the CRPD had been ratified by 182 nations (out of 195), showing broad international support.¹¹ To many disabled people, the ratification of the CRPD meant that they were finally recognized and acknowledged to have rights, too. Some activists feel empowered. The South African deaf leaders Bruno Druchen and Wilma Newboudt-Druchen optimistically call the CRPD “a potent new weapon in the fight for access” (Cooper and Rashid xi). As I investigate in the final chapter, real limitations have emerged, and disabled people in the Global South often still live lives of grievous precarity. But the dynamic literature of the Global South has made an important and often overlooked contribution to a change in how disabled people are perceived worldwide, from shameful objects of pity to fellow human beings with rights.

On “the Global South,” “Disability,”
and “Human Rights”

Before proceeding, I should pause to explain exactly what I mean by “the Global South,” “disability,” and “human rights,” keywords that are both indispensable to this study and frequently questioned. The first two terms cover enormously diverse groups of people and contain many ambiguities, while the third, while hopeful, is surrounded by contradiction and controversy.

“The Global South”

The phrase “Global South” has become increasingly widespread as a quick way to refer to poor nations of the world, replacing earlier terminology such as “third world” and “developing” countries. The idea of a Global South goes back at least to the mid-twentieth century but gained notice especially in the early 1980s with the publication of the Brandt Report, which called attention to the stark disparities in wealth and standards of living between the world’s Northern and Southern hemispheres.¹² It points to drastic inequalities in economic development, industrialization, use of technology, stability of government, and military power. Historically, colonizing nations were usually in the North, and colonized countries were in the South, which often has left a legacy in the South of poverty, exploitation, and economic dependence.

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Because the term “Global South” expresses such inequities, some scholars have found the concept empowering and to have advantageous value in resisting hegemonic forces (Hollington et al.).

Yet, as commentators have pointed out, the term “Global South” is a simplistic, reductive way to describe the stunning variety of humanity in these areas. (At the same time, we should note that the Global North, too, is quite heterogeneous, and that nations in the North have sometimes taken contrary positions.) The term “Global South” elides the fact that wealthy groups and nations exist in the South (in places such as China and Argentina), and numbers of disenfranchised people, including ethnic minorities, refugees, and immigrant communities, live in the North. Moreover, it can obscure the traumatic history of colonialism, not to mention the increasing interdependence and global forces that bind the North and South together. Jean and John L. Comaroff find the label “inherently slippery, inchoate, unfixed,” with “complex connotations” (45). They argue that from the beginning, modernity was a North-South collaboration (think especially of how the North and South were linked and mutually changed through colonialism). They also argue that, since the South is often the first to feel the effects of global historical forces, it can serve as a harbinger of the North’s future; this could be said, for example, with regard to climate change. Thus, the Global South has much to teach those of us in the North. The term “Global South” often does not convey this nuance and value.

Still, better nomenclature is elusive. While acknowledging the need to attend to the rich meaningfulness of the South, I have found the term a useful rubric for this study. At times I use “Global South” elastically to refer to diasporic and migrant communities who may be living in the North, allowing me to discuss, for example, Danticat’s depiction of immigrants from Haiti in the United States. I also refer to postcolonialism to discuss the harmful effects of colonialism and its afterlives, which are so important in this literature. Perhaps at times Immanuel Wallerstein’s terms “core,” “periphery,” and “semi-periphery” to describe the world system can be helpful, but they give central importance to Europe and North America and seem to make it harder to posit a full and sufficient self in the “peripheral” other parts of the globe, which runs against the thrust of much great postcolonial fiction.¹³ The phrase “the Global South” may serve as a more neutral space for these populations to exist on their own terms, even as we acknowledge enormous differences between them and the continuing impact of the North in a profoundly interconnected world. Rather than trying to define it, I employ the phrase as a concept and resource in this study.

“Disability”

For its part, as scholars in disability studies know (and they may want to skip over this section), the term “disability” has a complex etymology, and its meanings have been “shifting . . . and sometimes contradictory” (Adams et al. 5). “Disability” has been in the English language since at least the sixteenth century, yet what counts as a disability has changed over time. Moreover, the definition of “disability” has varied from place to place.¹⁴ Michael Ashley Stein, who participated in the drafting of the CRPD in the early twenty-first century, recalls a “wide divergence in self-reported prevalence rates of disability amongst” nations, including wild variations “from less than one percent in Kenya to twenty percent in New Zealand, even as the World Health Organization utilized a baseline assumption of ten percent and the World Bank estimated ten to twelve percent” (“China” 15). Such fluctuation points to the fact that disability, like all human variation, is a social construct. Its significance can vary tremendously across cultures. Notions of disability are further complicated by its inherent instability. Anyone can become disabled at any moment, making it more porous and fluid than most other identity categories. “Disability” became the preferred term globally during the twentieth century, but because the category is now so capacious, it has a certain ambiguity: it covers an extensive range of conditions that may be physical, sensory, or cognitive; temporary or permanent; and visible or invisible.

Along with such slipperiness, in the past “disability” has almost always been fraught with negativity, which has sometimes led people perceived to be disabled to distance themselves from the label. As Erving Goffman explains in his classic *Stigma* (1963), disability has so often been stigmatized socially that people with an impairment have gone to lengths to hide it from view or at least minimize its presence. In addition, the word “disability” has frequently been used figuratively (and, many disability studies scholars would aver, almost unthinkingly) in a range of contexts to signal disadvantage or disqualification. No surprise, then, that people broadly perceived as disabled—such as some deaf people who use sign language or dwarfs—have rejected the moniker.¹⁵ Paradoxically, as Alison Kafer and others have shown, “disability” thus encompasses people who may not themselves identify with the term or agree on a shared definition. Many people with disabilities do not want a cure, while others do. Moreover, until the second half of the twentieth century, they typically did not see themselves as part of a coherent group.

The rise of the disability rights movement in the United States and United Kingdom in the late 1960s—which largely coincides with the period

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under consideration in *Elusive Kinship*—began to challenge these dynamics as activists expressed a unified disability identity and even disability pride. By turning attention from the individual body to ways that societies marginalize disabled people, discriminate against them, and deny them dignity, they helped to create a viable identity among those with widely varying bodily conditions.¹⁶ They also fostered self-respect among disabled people. As they staged sit-ins and demonstrations, consciously following the Civil Rights Movement, protestors displayed both impatience with social oppression and a liberating collective sense of empowerment.

In the late twentieth century, scholars in the emerging academic field of disability studies joined the struggle, picking up on these galvanizing tenets of the disability rights movement and carrying disability as an illuminating category into a range of disciplines. Like activists, they emphasized a unified, inclusive disability identity, as well as the social barriers that prevent disabled people from flourishing.¹⁷ Like activists, they fought against notions of disability as shameful. With the title of her manifesto for the field, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (1998), Simi Linton recast the disability label as something to be embraced, not disavowed. A growing number of critics employ the affectionately defiant word “crip” (popularized by Robert McRuer and others) to resist ableism, much as “queer” had become a revolutionary word of pride in queer theory.¹⁸ In addition, disability theorists stressed that disability is an important part of being human. Because anyone can become disabled at any time, and just about everyone knows a disabled person, it is relevant to every person.

Together, these varied efforts have had a transformative effect on the meanings of disability in ways that have rippled across the globe. First, they have associated disability with rights, as mentioned above. In the United States, activism helped lead to the successful passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, which ensured equal rights to disabled citizens. On a global scale, as discussed above, efforts helped to produce the landmark UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), ratified in 2008, the first human rights treaty of the twenty-first century. While traditional negative ways of thinking about disability unquestionably persist in all parts of the world, such conventions and laws helped disabled people to be perceived as a disenfranchised group with rights.

Along the way, activists and scholars sparked recognition that disability is a product of the environment as much as of the individual body. While early efforts first emphasized the overlooked social, nonmedical aspects of disability, more recently, disability theorists including Tom Shakespeare and Tobin

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Siebers have called for a more nuanced approach that includes both social and biological factors. Siebers terms this linkage “complex embodiment” (25); others, such as Davis and David Morris in their essay in *The End of Normal* (2013), have referred to it as a “biocultural” notion of disability. Notably, both the ADA and the CRPD include social factors in their definition of “disability.” The CRPD, for instance, states in its preamble that “disability is an evolving concept,” and “disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.” By acknowledging the pivotal role of social forces, this definition creates space for variation in cultural meanings and goes well beyond the classic definition of 1547, which limited disability to the body. Today the meanings of “disability” are so manifold and flexible that some scholars maintain a simple explanation is not possible.

With “debility” in *The Right to Maim* (2017), Jasbir Puar adds a compelling new element. She explains the term as “a needed disruption” to triangulate the ability-disability binary and convey “the slow wearing down of populations,” which include vast numbers of people who are not commonly seen as disabled, but are not able-bodied, either (xiv–xv). Using a provocative intersectional approach, Puar argues that debility is a common feature of neoliberal capitalism, and that Black and Brown bodies, especially, become disabled or debilitated so capitalist entities can extract value “from populations that would otherwise be disposable” (xviii). Saying that disability and debility often overlap and distinctions are not clear, Puar dramatically expands the scope of disability studies and provides a useful way to approach some of the representations of disability in the Global South that we will see. While her arguments are insightful and provocative, one significant reservation is that she consistently treats disability as something negative, which, unfortunately, reinforces the widespread ableist bias that disability studies scholars in the North have worked so hard to resist.¹⁹ In her understandable focus on preventing debilitation, she seems to miss how productive and valuable disabled identities can be, how they are part of the spectrum of human difference in every society. In any case, as with “the Global South,” I seek not to define “disability” as a firm category but, rather, to explore it as a concept.

“Human Rights”

Aided by globalization, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have been called the era of international human rights. Such human rights are

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now, as Michael Ignatieff put it in 2001, “the lingua franca of global moral thought” (53), or in Samuel Moyn’s words, “the last utopia,” the remaining site of hope for dignity and justice for all people across the world, although controversy about rights persists. Of course, concern for the dignity and well-being of other people goes back to ancient times.²⁰ The idea of state-sanctioned rights dates back at least to the eighteenth century, but such Enlightenment-based ideas hinge on the right of a group of people to be members of a sovereign state that in turn protects them. The notion of *human* rights, in contrast, springs from the concept of an international covenant that rejects violence, oppression, and other abuses of people that occur inside a sovereign state (Ganguly 11). Human rights appeared on the world stage in 1948, with the United Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which were for “all human beings,” that year; subsequently, the United Nations produced more specific conventions to eliminate racism and discrimination against women, to protect the rights of children and migrant workers, and the like. According to Moyn, the international rights movement did not really become a global force until the late 1970s, when other widespread emancipatory ideologies, including communism and postcolonial nationalism, increasingly appeared unsuccessful. The literary works I discuss were published at a time when the world increasingly directed its attention to protecting people from torture, genocide, oppression, economic disenfranchisement, and other violations of human dignity.

Human rights conventions have sometimes been met with suspicion and criticism, not least because they are occasionally perceived as vehicles for imposing Euro-American values worldwide, complicit with the imperial and neoliberal forces that cause poverty and suffering in the first place. With regard to people with disabilities, Puar is critical of rights discourses, maintaining that they privilege some disabled people while ignoring many others; as she trenchantly points out, rights rely on the same global systems (neoliberalism, imperialism) that sanction the debilitation of others (such as people who are affected by war or terrible labor situations). Puar’s criticisms are important, given the way whole populations are now treated as second rate, and pair well with Moyn’s recent work arguing that rights by themselves are insufficient in a neoliberal age. I explore the limitations of human rights in more detail using twenty-first-century literature in the final chapter. In the Epilogue, I briefly consider some possible ways forward.

To figure out how best to proceed, we need first to understand the momentous changes with regard to thinking about disability since the emergence of human rights. One essential component of that remaining labor is the need

for scholars to pay more attention to disability issues in the Global South and, when necessary, reformulate theory developed in the North. I hope that *Evasive Kinship* will help with that project by exploring how, since World War II and especially since 1980, the vibrant fiction of the Global South in English both subtly shaped and reflected the international turn in how disabled people are seen.

Obstacles

Given such complexities, writing about disability rights in the Global South presents challenges that help to explain why the figures of disability in Anglophone postcolonial literature have not received more academic notice. Scholars in postcolonial studies may feel disability is uninteresting compared with many other pressing issues, while those in literary disability studies located in the North often confront the difficulty of literature describing circumstances that are dauntingly different, arising from places where theories and methodologies developed in North America and Europe may not apply.

Challenge 1: Global Income Inequality

In approaching the issue, a few disability theorists have insisted that one must start at the macro-level with the pivotal economic inequality between North and South. For example, Michael Davidson argues that scholars working on disability in global contexts should first consider “the unequal distribution of wealth” (*Concerto* 172), while Meekosha states that “a southern theory of disability and human rights must inevitably question international inequities” (678). Such matters are not a new concern. For more than half a century, social justice advocates, from Moses Moskowitz in 1968 to Nussbaum in 2006 and beyond, have been decrying the stunning inequality dividing the planet’s populations. The gap between countries’ wealth has been increasing inexorably over the past two hundred years and shows no sign of slowing or narrowing. In 2000, Americans were nine times richer than Latin Americans, seventy-two times richer than Sub-Saharan Africans, and no less than eighty times richer than South Asians (Hickel). The anti-poverty charity Oxfam reported in 2016 that the richest sixty-two people in the world had as much wealth as the entire bottom half of the human population, or 3.6 billion people (“Richest”). Ironically, alongside such wealth disparity are some hopeful signs. According to one report, the rate of global extreme poverty shrank by almost half between 2010 and 2019, with the rate declining from 15.7 percent to 7.7 percent (Lawler). China and India were primary drivers of this good

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news, although nations as varied as Cambodia and Ethiopia also saw success (“Millions”). Such figures give optimism that the United Nations can achieve its ambitious goal to “end poverty in all its forms everywhere” (UN “Sustainable”). Still, the current COVID-19 pandemic endangers decades of growth, with low-income countries and those dependent on tourist money at particular risk, and the global inequality crisis threatens many vulnerable populations and requires more attention.

The North actively contributed to this troubling economic divide. While globalization promises to lift more people from poverty and ensure greater access to health care, critics point out that global capitalist free-market policies frequently actually foster inequality. Before around 1960, European powers conquered or controlled lands in the Global South through colonialism; extracted natural resources to enrich themselves; and often produced violent conflict, corrupt leaders, and dependence. Colonialism also smoothed the way for the more recent rise of neoliberal free-market globalization. Wealthy nations have formed, in Nussbaum’s words, “a powerful global economy [that] makes all economic choices interdependent and often imposes on poorer nations conditions that reinforce and deepen existing inequalities” (*Frontiers* 19). Money still flows from the poorest to the richest countries. From transnational corporations to the debt system, free-trade agreements, and tax havens for the wealthy, a neoliberal world system of capitalism, supported by nations in the North, shapes the immense international disparity in wealth.²¹ Such causes are together so pervasive and enormous that they can be difficult to perceive clearly, but their effects are readily apparent to anyone who makes even a cursory inquiry.