

Reflections

What Future People Will There Be? Neurodiverse Heroes for a Changing Planet

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In this essay, I juxtapose two sites of the construction of disability. The first site is the interdisciplinary academic field of bioethics. The second site is science fiction. Both speculate about the future. But, literature produced at one site speculates poorly in ways that reproduce and retrench current stigma, while literature produced at the other site speculates in a more valuable way, creatively and thoughtfully engaging novel possibilities. One might assume that the literature I call valuable is produced under the banner of bioethics, structured by esteemed institutions and spearheaded by vaunted, internationally known scholars. It is not. I believe that science fiction increasingly speculates in a more valuable way. Here, I will say why and juxtapose the two literatures to illustrate the contingency of neurodiversity.

Disability is produced through complex power relations. By that I mean that what counts as disability, and how it is intertwined with a person's lifestyle, body, prospects, and experiences, is historically conditioned and discursively constructed. Disability is, therefore, deeply contingent. (For a book-length treatment of this from a feminist, philosophical perspective, see Tremain 2017). Because it is social and political, medical and biological renderings of disability are not exhaustive and, indeed, these renderings are themselves vectors of the power relationships that one needs to investigate in order to understand what disability is. Merely medical understandings of disability are reductive and significantly misunderstand disability, reframing it in harmful ways. This does not mean that disability lacks material reality. It does mean, however, that significant analytical effort is required to understand how the material reality of disability is shaped and, in turn, shapes encounters among living beings and the environment. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson employs the term disability/ability system to refer to the complex system of power that classifies bodies as either abled or disabled (2002, 6). While this sys-

tem inscribes disability, and—as Shelley Tremain argues—impairment, as natural, an urgent task of critical disability theory is to thoroughly denaturalize disability (2001). The project of critical disability theory involves, minimally, contextualizing disability and showcasing the ways it is variously produced. Maximally, it continuously reframes disability to avoid biological reductions, rework power relations, and refuse oppression.

The term “neurodiversity” and the identity “neurodivergent” are meant to refer to varied intellectual styles and functions, including but not limited to intellectual disability, depression and anxiety, and autism. The terms are part of a countermovement to reframe cognitive difference, typically understood as limitation. Activists and scholars employing these terms expand the contextualizing conversation about disability to include cognition, both because the mind and the body are deeply intertwined (some use the phrase “bodymind”) and because, unfortunately, political interventions regarding disability have often been limited to the physical (Price 2014). Such a limitation on the conversation misses much of what disability is.

Transhumanists—enthusiastic supporters of human enhancement—have long published dreams for the future arguing that we must be radically different if we hope to live well. Their bioethical visions, however, are harmful, and denigrate the lives of already-existing persons. They suggest that human enhancement requires negative eugenics—that is, selection and shaping of future populations. (For a book-length treatment of this issue, see Hall 2016). They prioritize intellectual capacity as measured by IQ and connect IQ to quality of life (Bostrom 2008). They assume that disability can be isolated in-utero and that it is rational to avoid carrying a disabled fetus to term (Savulescu 2001). They argue that we are unfit for the future and that successfully dealing

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with large-scale problems requires enhancement, including moral enhancement through pharmaceutical means (Persson and Savulescu 2012). Other bioethicists argue that solving large-scale problems like climate change could require genetic selection (Liao et al. 2012). These visions fundamentally exclude disabled people from the future. Furthermore, bioethicists working in this speculative vein make two fundamental mistakes. They treat both disability and the future as inert and predictable. When Julian Savulescu and Ingmar Persson suggest that we are unfit for the future, they presume to know what skills and cognitive styles will be valuable for the future (2012). Yet, forms of life and difference are knit through complex interactions with environments. Disability is contingent, as is the future. Savulescu and Persson have not convinced me that their predictions of the future and presumptions about what lives are best are accurate or warranted. As philosophers are fond of saying, we have no guarantee that the future will look like the past. As they are not fond of saying, we need disability to live well in the future.

Consider the speculative fiction of Nnedi Okorafor and N. K. Jemisin. In the Binti trilogy (2019), Okorafor builds a character who stims (self-soothes) through “treeing,” a process that at times is depicted by the author as similar to a seizure, but is also frequently depicted as something like meditation. When Binti, the titular character and hero, trees, she runs complex mathematical equations through her mind at a terrific pace. She is connected to her home planet and region through a practice of covering her skin and hair in clay, and after a deadly encounter that connects her with a member of a species she considers an enemy, her hair becomes a graft between Binti and this other species. Her neurodiversity and bodily difference become the key to required intergalactic, cross-species negotiation in a fundamentally new world with new requirements. There is no purity for Binti, not in terms of embodiment or in terms of her loyalties. She is a liminal figure operating in a radical geopolitical space very unlike our own. Not only does Okorafor avoid assuming she

knows what counts as disability, Okorafor varies the setting in which the character of Binti finds herself, showing that the complex dynamic between embodiment and world conditions the character and meaning of disability. There is no need to directly relate Binti’s character to a particular disability, as Okorafor’s work is a demonstration of the political and historical contingency of diagnosis and neurodiversity. Binti is the neurodiverse hero that bioethicists fail to imagine when they consider the needs of the future. In *Who Fears Death*, another impure hero—the product of rape by colonizing forces who embodies visible difference in skin tone—is our protagonist. Her difference has new meaning because it has been reframed by context, intertwining in unexpected ways with her environment and again demonstrating the contingency of the meanings of neurodiversity and disability more generally.

In the Broken Earth trilogy, N. K. Jemisin radically engages an apocalyptic future vis-à-vis climate (2015, 2016, 2017). Her work is another example of science fiction showing the poverty of speculation about the future, especially about climate catastrophe, in bioethics. Jemisin’s vilified protagonists, called “orogenes,” who are connected to the tremors of the earth and can quell them, alongside her mythical stone eaters who descend from the deadly convergence between person and planet, become key players in another example of a delicate negotiation, this time with a planet bled dry. A coalition between these groups, and terrific effort that chews away the body, makes that negotiation possible.

Again, I claim that both bioethics and science fiction are sites of the construction of disability, including neurodiversity. Constructions can be liberating, confining, and often both. Both literatures I gesture toward here inscribe the meaning of disability and both dream of the future. But in whose speculative imagination does disability flourish? While science fiction is no stranger to eugenic visions, I argue that fantastical utopias playing out in bioethics are fundamentally eugenic, uniting the desire for perfect-

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-ion with the rejection of difference (Hall 2016). Rayna Rapp and Faye Ginsburg argue that we must make disability count for the future, rather than counting—and attempting to eliminate—disability (Ginsburg and Rapp 2015). New work in science fiction, as evidenced by Jemisin and Okorafor, is poised to make disability count. I celebrate their novel constructions of neurodiversity and disability. What will the future be like, and who will we be within that future? Jemisin and Okorafor illustrate provocative answers to that question.

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