

## Integrating Race, Transforming Feminist Disability Studies

Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women, as well as white, economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision to total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement.

—Barbara Smith ([1980] 2014, 134)

*Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass, over, or go through the confines of the “normal.”

—Gloria Anzaldúa ([1987] 2007, 3)

**W**hat would feminist disability studies look like if it were grounded in feminist-of-color theory? Feminists of color, such as those in the epigraphs, have been writing for decades about disability, illness, and health as part of feminist politics. And yet, these formative feminist theorists have rarely been included in the intellectual lineage of feminist disability studies. Generally, feminists of color, especially those who write about their personal experiences with disability, illness, and disease, are viewed at best as sites of analysis and much more rarely as intellectuals theorizing systems of gender, race, and (dis)ability.<sup>1</sup> Noting this trend in scholarship generally, Alexander G. Weheliye critiques the fact that “white European thinkers are granted a conceptual *carte blanche*, while those uttered from the purview of minority discourse that speak the same questions are almost exclusively relegated to the jurisdiction of ethnographic locality . . . because minority discourses seemingly cannot inhabit the space of proper theoretical

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<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere, I, Sami Schalk, propose using the term *(dis)ability* to refer to the “socially constructed system of norms [that] categorizes and values bodyminds based on concepts of ability and disability” (Schalk 2017). (Dis)ability as a critical term—with its parenthetical clause suggesting the porosity of ability and disability—prioritizes the “social perspectives, practices, and concerns about disability,” shifting us away from a critical practice “dependent upon the presence of disabled people” (Schalk 2017; see also Schalk 2018).

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reflection” (2014, 6). Feminists of color have long argued that theorizing from experiences of marginalization is a benefit, not a detriment. Nonetheless, the insights of feminists of color on disability have largely been excluded as intellectual contributions to feminist disability studies.

This exclusion exists for a multitude of reasons, not the least of which is that feminist-of-color approaches to disability, illness, and health do not always align with the language, approaches, and perspectives within mainstream disability studies and disability rights activism. Feminists of color tend to approach disability from within broader concerns among people of color in a racist world, ranging from environmental racism and medical abuse to police brutality and economic exclusion. For example, in the foundational feminist-of-color text *This Bridge Called My Back*, Native writers Jo Carrillo and Chrystos both address the targeting of Native populations for illness and early death through environmental racism (such as uranium mining and nuclear waste), economic exploitation, and racial violence (Carrillo 1983, 66; Chrystos 1983, 68). Similarly, in the sister collection, *this bridge we call home*, lesbian Native writer Judith K. Witherow elaborates on the relationship of disability, health, race, and class. She writes, “What I know about illness, cures, and addictions comes from experience and firsthand stories,” detailing her disabilities as well as the disabilities and health concerns of her family members, which, she argues, are often caused and/or exacerbated by factory and coal-mining work, pollution, malnutrition, and lack of affordable health care (Witherow 2002, 288). In each instance, these Native feminists demonstrate that their personal and communal experiences of disability, illness, and disease cannot be understood outside of systems of violent racial, economic, environmental, and sexual exploitation. These and other insights from feminists of color who theorize disability as simultaneously a “bodymind” experience and a part of intersecting oppressions have generative potential for the field of feminist disability studies.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, we demonstrate how feminist-of-color writing, theory, and activism can offer new approaches and sites of analysis for feminist disability studies, advancing a framework that we call feminist-of-color disability studies. To be clear, when we use the term *feminist of color* we understand it as a critical methodology and political category that can be taken up by scholars and activists of any gender or racial identity. Feminist-of-color disability studies is therefore an intellectual, theoretical, and political project that simultaneously acknowledges existing critical race work in feminist

<sup>2</sup> Bodyminds is a materialist feminist disability studies concept developed by Margaret Price that refers to the inextricable enmeshment of the mind and body (Price 2015).

disability studies, claims work in feminist-of-color scholarship not recognized as disability studies, and sets forth an agenda to transform feminist disability studies by drawing attention to how its unacknowledged whiteness has shaped the boundaries and methods of the field thus far.<sup>3</sup> In what follows we first provide a brief history of feminist disability studies. We then lay out the critical approaches essential to integrating race into the field to produce feminist-of-color disability studies. Next, we identify and discuss the central domains of feminist-of-color disability studies: discourse, state violence, health/care, and activism. We conclude with suggestions for future scholarship.

By titling this article “Integrating Race, Transforming Feminist Disability Studies,” we build upon Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s field-defining article “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory” (2002). The titular phrase “Integrating Race” is not intended to suggest that feminist disability studies scholars have never considered race but rather that race has not been *integral* to the field’s citational practices and that the marginalization of racial analysis has shaped feminist disability studies’ approaches.<sup>4</sup> Further, integrating race does not mean merely including more feminist disability scholars of color like ourselves or focusing more feminist disability scholarship on racialized populations. Rather, it involves changing the citational politics of the field so that feminist-of-color and critical race theories inform work in feminist disability studies as a whole even when people of color are absent as sites of analysis or as scholars theorizing from identity or experience. Toward this aim, this article maps out an initial overview for a feminist-of-color disability studies, providing more breadth than depth in our examples.

In addition, this article focuses on a predominantly US context. We acknowledge that this is a limit of this initial theorization of our framework and look forward to being in conversation with others on how transnational perspective can further complicate the ideas we set forth here.<sup>5</sup> We encourage readers to explore our epigrams, citations, and footnotes and use them as seeds for future scholarship. This is merely the beginning, we hope, of a robust intellectual conversation.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to those we engage more closely in this article, we want to recognize other scholars already producing work we would consider feminist-of-color disability studies, including Theri A. Pickens, Cindy Wu, Mel Chen, Michelle Jarman, Jess Waggoner, Ally Day, Juliann Anesi, and Lezlie Frye.

<sup>4</sup> For more on race and citation politics, see Delgado (1984) or Ray (2018).

<sup>5</sup> For existing examples, see Erevelles (2011), E. Kim (2017), or Puar (2017).

### A brief history of (white) feminist disability studies

My critique of contemporary scholarship in feminist disability studies is that while it has been extremely effective in foregrounding the limitations of the universalizing category of “woman” that mainstream feminism continues to uphold (notwithstanding critiques from poor women, lesbians, women of color, and third world women), it falls prey to its own critique of normativity by failing to seriously engage “difference” within its own ranks along the axes of race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and national difference.

—Nirmala Erevelles (2011, 126)

Feminist disability studies is an area of scholarly inquiry that merges women’s, gender, and feminist studies with disability studies. As the newer field, disability studies was influenced by feminist theory. Prior to the coining of the term *feminist disability studies*, scholarship in this area began to appear in the late 1980s with the bulk of the work focused on the lives of disabled women.<sup>6</sup> In the 1990s, publications began to directly engage and critique feminist theory and the women’s movement, particularly the exclusion of disabled women and disability rights.<sup>7</sup> In 1994, Garland-Thomson coined the term *feminist disability studies* in a review essay that emphasizes the need for a feminist disability studies that includes but is not exclusively focused on disabled women. In this article, Garland-Thomson names and defines the field by reviewing work that “participates in the discourse of feminist disability studies without even announcing itself as such” (1994, 592). This tactic is one we too use in our task of integrating race more comprehensively into feminist disability studies today.

By the early 2000s, feminist disability studies had arrived. In 2001 and 2002 the feminist philosophy journal *Hypatia* published a two-part special issue called “Feminism and Disability” (Kittay, Silvers, and Wendell 2001, 2002). *NWSA Journal* quickly followed suit in 2002 with a special issue titled “Feminist Disability Studies” (Hall 2002), which included Garland-Thomson’s “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory” (2002). Although Garland-Thomson published multiple pieces using the term *feminist disability studies* prior to 2002, “Integrating Disability” is the piece that truly shaped the field. It has been reprinted in several collections, cited over eight hundred times, and is taught regularly in disability studies courses. More recently, the 2010s saw the publications of Hall’s edited collection *Feminist Disability Studies* in 2011 and *Hypatia*’s special issue “New Conversations in Feminist Disability Studies” in 2015 (Hall 2011, 2015). In

<sup>6</sup> See Fine and Asch (1988b), Rousso, O’Malley, and Severance (1988), Morris (1989), and Lonsdale (1990).

<sup>7</sup> See Begum (1992), Lloyd (1992), Hillyer (1993), and Morris (1993).

2017, the National Women's Studies Association established the Alison Piepmeier Prize for books in feminist disability studies, marking a clear recognition of the establishment of the field.

As we researched and wrote this brief history of feminist disability studies, we noted the limited engagement with race as an analytic. While it is true that the scholars are mostly, though not exclusively, white women, it is the focus of the arguments and citational practices that foreground whiteness as the "constitutive underpinning" of the field (Bell 2006, 275). The whiteness of feminist disability studies is perhaps unsurprising given the whiteness of disability studies as a whole. And yet, feminist disability studies acknowledged the need for engagement with race long before Chris Bell's critique of "White Disability Studies" (2006). In the epilogue to their edited collection *Women with Disabilities*, for example, Michelle Fine and Adrienne Asch write, "Women of color who have disabilities are also underrepresented in this volume. For some, disability is their primary self-definition; for others it is not. How does race figure in a woman's experience of disability?" (1988a, 334). Similarly, Nasa Begum writes that "disabled women cannot be treated as a unitary group," insisting that we must consider race, class, and sexuality, but ultimately she laments that "it is not possible within the ambit of this article to provide this analysis" (Begum 1992, 70, 71). As shown, early feminist disability studies scholars recognized the need for racial analysis but were frequently not able to do it.

Despite early acknowledgments of the importance of race and calls for future scholarship to better include racial analysis, however, feminist disability studies scholarship has primarily entailed cursory or comparative inclusion of race with limited engagement with feminist-of-color scholarship, even when such engagement is clearly warranted. For instance, Margaret Lloyd (1992, 207) draws from "the history of black feminism" to propose an intersectional feminist model of disability, yet her main citation for this theorization is white social policy scholar Fiona Williams (1989) rather than the black feminist theorists Williams builds her work upon, such as Hazel Carby, bell hooks, and Gloria Joseph. To take another example, despite mentioning racialized examples of the intersections of gender and disability such as Sara Baartman, Julia Pastrana, and Audre Lorde, Garland-Thomson's "Integrating Disability" includes only two feminists of color, Lorde herself and Toni Morrison, within its sixty-four total citations (Garland-Thomson 2002, 7, 9, 12).<sup>8</sup> These examples illustrate how feminist disability studies

<sup>8</sup> Sara Baartman was a Black woman known as Hottentot Venus, and Julia Pastrana was a Mexican woman known as the Bearded Lady. Both were shown in nineteenth-century freak shows.

has tended to acknowledge the importance of race, typically by analogizing race and disability or by drawing from the lessons and insights of feminist-of-color writing, without sustained critical engagement with feminist-of-color scholarship and theorizing. While we do not wish to overstate the limited treatment of race in feminist disability studies, we do want to emphasize the further need for engagement with feminists of color as *theorists* in their own right. Our concern, therefore, is primarily with the field's approaches and citational politics. The largely deracinated approach to feminist disability studies, we argue, has limited the investments, methods, and interventions of the field.

There are, of course, exceptions to the general whiteness of feminist disability studies. Take, for example, the 1993 special issue of *Canadian Woman Studies* on "Women and Disability" (Blackford et al. 1993), which includes personal and academic essays by/on Native, Indonesian, Salvadorian, Bangladeshi, and South Asian disabled women, or Alison Kafer's intellectual history of Donna Haraway's cyborg in which Kafer explicitly acknowledges Haraway's reliance on feminists of color to theorize the cyborg and cites feminist-of-color responses to Haraway to inform and improve disability studies critiques of cyborg theory (Kafer 2013, 103–28). These exceptions unquestionably exist; however, they do not negate the overarching trends we have identified across three decades.

Our critique here builds on extant scholarship at the intersections of disability, race, and gender. In *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts*, Erevelles (2011) furthers what she terms a "transnational feminist disability studies perspective," through which she critiques both the whiteness of feminist disability studies and the lack of critical engagement with disability in transnational feminist and feminist-of-color scholarship. This framework situates disability, gender, class, race, and sexuality within the broader transnational context of colonialism and neocolonialism. Notably, it highlights the absence of disability analysis (named as such) in "third world feminist analyses of difference," despite the disabling legacies of colonialism and the ableism of the patriarchal postcolonial state (Erevelles 2011, 130). Erevelles, we contend, is woefully undercited and underappreciated for her interventions in feminist disability studies. More recently, Moya Bailey and Izetta Mobley have proposed a specifically black feminist disability studies framework that takes black feminist scholarship as foundational to analyzing the relationship of disability to race, gender, class, and sexuality (Bailey and Mobley 2018). Our work here builds upon Erevelles, Bailey, and Mobley, and other feminists of color working in disability studies in order to articulate a feminist-of-color disability studies umbrella framework that both encompasses the existing work we cite throughout this article and provides a model for producing future scholarship. We view feminist-of-color disability

studies not as a replacement for feminist disability studies or an addition but, as our title suggests, an element of the field that must be integrated fully in order to transform it as a whole.

We use the rest of this article to further theorize what it would mean to fully integrate race in feminist disability studies. In “Integrating Disability,” Garland-Thomson lays out the parameters of feminist disability studies, arguing for a universalizing rather than a minoritizing approach, establishing the field’s fundamental theoretical premises, and identifying its central domains (representation, the body, identity, and activism). Most importantly for our purposes, she argues: “Integrating disability into feminist theory is generative, broadening our collective inquiries, questioning our assumptions, and contributing to feminism’s intersectionality. Introducing a disability analysis does not narrow the inquiry, limit the focus only to women with disabilities, or preclude engaging other manifestations of feminisms. . . . Integrating disability does not obscure our critical focus on the registers of race, sexuality, ethnicity, or gender, nor is it additive. Rather, considering disability shifts the conceptual framework to strengthen our understanding of how these multiple systems intertwine, redefine, and mutually constitute one another” (Garland-Thomson 2002, 4). Similarly, we contend that integrating race into feminist disability studies is generative and broadening, that it does not limit our sites of analysis to disabled women of color nor preclude substantive engagement with sexuality, class, or other vectors of power. We argue that for feminist disability studies to effectively improve our understanding of intersecting and mutually constitutive oppressions, it must take up feminist-of-color writing, activism, and theory, which have long engaged issues of the body, illness, health, medicine, and disability in ways too often excluded by the field to date.

### **Theoretical frameworks: How to do feminist-of-color disability studies**

The methodology of disability studies involves scrutinizing not bodily or mental impairments but the social norms that define particular attributes as impairments, as well as the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations.

—Julie Avril Minich (2016)

Centering race in feminist disability analysis necessitates thinking beyond the politics of recognition, representation, and identity that characterized early disability studies and instead framing disability studies as a *method*. As the epigraph above suggests, this entails employing disability studies as a lens to analyze the intersecting systems of ableism, heteropatriarchy, white

supremacy, and capitalist violence, particularly as they assign value or lack thereof to certain bodyminds. It further requires questioning why certain topics—like fatness, HIV/AIDS, asthma, or diabetes—are rarely considered under the rubric of disability studies and the ways in which race and class determine the legibility of such topics within the field. Our understanding of disability studies as method is first and foremost influenced by feminist- and queer-of-color thought, but it also takes into account crip theory, all of which focus on methodological rather than identitarian approaches.

Feminist- and queer-of-color critiques, according to Grace Hong and Roderick Ferguson, “profoundly question nationalist and identitarian modes of political organization and craft alternative understandings of subjectivity, collectivity, and power.” As such, these fields of inquiry refuse to cast race, gender, and sexuality as discrete entities, instead highlighting how the “dividing line between valued and devalued” life cuts across and through identity categories (Hong and Ferguson 2011, 2). Cathy Cohen, for instance, emphasizes the need for attention to the “systematic relationship among forms of domination” (1997, 442), envisioning a queer politics in which “one’s relation to [dominant] power, and not some homogenized identity, is privileged in determining one’s political comrades” (438). Inspired by these interventions, feminist-of-color disability studies likewise understands disability as a relationship to power rather than a legible identity to which one can lay claim.

Following this, a feminist-of-color disability studies method highlights the ideological and rhetorical deployment of ableism within legacies of eugenics, colonialism/neocolonialism, counterterrorism, welfare reform, war, urban redevelopment, and other oppressive practices and structures that route life-sustaining resources away from populations of color. More specifically, it pays attention to the linkages between the ideologies of ability and the logics of gender and sexual regulation that undergird racialized resource deprivation. This attunement to the workings of power, that is, how ableist violence operates alongside and through heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy, further allows feminist-of-color disability studies to explore unexpected points of affinity that might build coalition across categories. Like feminist- and queer-of-color critique, a feminist-of-color disability analysis aims not to be additive—simply layering disability on top of a laundry list of identities—but to demonstrate how disability is in fact central to the gendered and sexual management of women and queers of color.

Feminist-of-color disability studies is also indebted to work in crip theory. Proposed as an analogue to queer theory, crip theory takes a radical stance toward disability that attends to the limitations and exclusions enacted by identity politics (McRuer 2006). Crip theorists shift focus from a politics

of disability representation to the violent operations enabled through ideologies of ability, or the implicit and often compulsory favoring of able-bodiedness and able-mindedness. This attention to ideology proves useful for feminist-of-color disability studies, as work in crip theory aids in articulating the mutual constitution of ableism, racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and cissexism and in tracing the raced, gendered, sexual, and classed nature of compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness. To be clear, while crip theory and feminist disability studies frequently overlap, and many scholars include themselves in both intellectual endeavors, they remain distinct, though complementary, political and methodological approaches. Feminist disability studies has a much longer history and entails a critical approach to gender and disability. Crip theory provides a newer theoretical lens to examine disability beyond identity or even embodiment, an approach informed by queer theory that doesn't necessarily focus on gender (though it often does). We contend that the methods offered by crip theory can be used for better racial analysis in disability studies, but that does not mean that all crip theory effectively engages with race.<sup>9</sup>

Building upon both crip theory and feminist and queer-of-color critique, feminist-of-color disability studies deploys disability studies as a lens that is not object- or identity-oriented, moving us away from a politics of representation and toward an understanding of (dis)ability as a social system and disability as a relationship to power that intersects with and is mutually constituted by race, gender, class, and sexuality. By situating disability within other overlapping systems of domination, feminist-of-color disability studies also emphasizes coalition, affinity, and solidarity. The domains identified in the remainder of this article showcase such possible nodes of affinity, demonstrating the scope and purchase of this framework while envisioning alternate lines of collectivity.

### **Domains and sites of analysis: Where to do feminist-of-color disability studies**

Given these theoretical foundations and frameworks, feminist-of-color disability studies centers different sites of analysis than feminist disability studies has traditionally encompassed. In "Integrating Disability," Garland-Thomson (2002) names the central domains of feminist disability studies as representation, the body, identity, and activism. Building upon both Garland-Thomson's structure and our discussion above, we propose that

<sup>9</sup> A separate critique of the whiteness of crip theory may be warranted, but it is beyond the scope of this article.

the central domains of feminist-of-color disability studies are discourse, state violence, health/care, and activism. In this section, we explain why these sites of analysis are important for feminist-of-color disability studies and discuss how this theoretical framework would operate in each domain. We provide brief illustrative examples of work by feminists of color that engage in the intellectual project of feminist-of-color disability studies even if that work does not name itself explicitly as disability studies. We provide these examples to show feminist disability studies and feminist-of-color theory scholars alike how such work can be understood as critical engagements with race, gender, and (dis)ability in ways that are productive for both groups and both fields.

### **Discourse**

Discourses of (dis)ability, that is, rhetoric about ability and disability encompassing discussions of mental/physical fitness, normality and abnormality, and biological superiority, have been used to create, maintain, and justify racial and gender hierarchies (and the various injustices and violence that result from such hierarchies) in numerous ways across various historical moments. Racist science about black bodyminds being less susceptible to pain, more susceptible to disease, and inherently in need of white care and control was used to justify black enslavement in the United States (Boster 2013). Racialized and gendered discourses were also used by residential boarding schools in regard to Native parents, especially mothers, who were represented as dangerous transmitters of Native language and culture, which supposedly stunted the intellectual, physical, and moral development of their children (Adams 1995; Jacobs 2009). An early founder of such a school, Captain Richard H. Pratt, infamously used the phrase “Kill the Indian in him, and save the man,” arguing that becoming “civilized” and speaking English improved health and industriousness (Pratt 1892). In each of these examples discourses of (dis)ability are fundamental to the operation of racism and sexism. By addressing discourses of (dis)ability, feminist-of-color disability studies can expose “the ideology of ability in situations that do not appear immediately to be about disability” (Minich 2014, 98). On a practical level therefore, this first domain of feminist-of-color disability studies allows us to (1) read these moments as simultaneous instances of racism, sexism, and ableism; (2) refuse to collapse the categories of race, gender, and (dis)ability while acknowledging their mutual constitution; (3) trace and identify how these rhetorics fundamentally shape social norms and practices; and (4) counter these oppressive discourses in solidarity with multiply marginalized populations.

Critical race and feminist scholars of the history of science and medicine and contemporary health, science, and technology studies model ways to read the gendered and racial biases of these cultural arenas, even when such biases are cloaked in the language of objectivity, naturalness, or help. Scholarship in these areas reveals how the bodyminds of people of color, women, and trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming people are pathologized and marked with discourses of disability even when such individuals are not legally, medically, or socially recognized as disabled. Feminist-of-color disability studies can bring the knowledge and insights of disability studies to bear on these scholarly conversations, thereby marking these fields as intimately connected to disability studies in ways not previously recognized. This intellectual work is modeled in recent scholarship by Dorothy Roberts on race, gender, and disability in contemporary reproductive technologies in which she explores the ways such technologies are marketed as liberatory and progressive while actually perpetuating ableism, racism, and misogyny (Roberts 2010; Roberts and Jesudason 2013).

As indicated in the domains section above, discourses of (dis)ability operate beyond/outside of bodyminds and identity, yet they nonetheless result in striking social, political, and material consequences for populations whose oppression and exclusion are justified through such discourses. There are several existing examples of feminist-of-color disability studies scholarship in this area.

In *Accessible Citizenship*, Julie Avril Minich analyzes how discourses of disability and metaphors of bodily integrity and health are used to frame discussions of nation, citizenship, and immigration. In the United States, the nation is imagined “as a whole, nondisabled body whose health must be protected from external pollutants” and internal threats to national well-being (Minich 2014, 2). These nationalist discourses of (dis)ability shape not only immigration laws, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the 1882 Act to Regulate Immigration, but also the treatment of immigrants, people read as immigrants (that is, people of color, especially those with English as a second language), and other groups, such as disabled and poor people who are considered burdens on the financial health of the nation (Stanley et al. 2013, 77). The rhetorical use of disability and health within immigration debates and policies demonstrates how disability discourses operate beyond disabled bodyminds alone and the need for scholars to grapple with the entwinement of such discourses with race. Along these lines, Minich argues that “the fact that the image of the unauthorized immigrant as a danger to the health of the national body carries such rhetorical force is a direct result of the ideology of ability; it is because bodies deemed unhealthy or disabled are seen as unsuited for political inclusion that the

invocation of a disease attacking the body politic is so effective at mobilizing anti-immigrant sentiment,” not only in discussions of the US-Mexico border, the focus of Minich’s work, but also in histories of immigration policy and in current immigration debates regarding refugees and immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries as well (Minich 2014, 98).

In another example, in my own work, I, Jina B. Kim, detail how advocates of freeway expansion in East Los Angeles used disability discourse and ableist metaphors to justify the freeways’ eventual displacement of mostly low-income people of color, especially Chicana/o people. I write that “urban planners seized upon the medical language of blight” to represent “racialized and low-income neighborhoods as diseased sites waiting for excision” from the supposedly otherwise healthy body of the city (J. Kim 2017, 505). While the freeways were “cast in terms of physical hyperability” to increase function, mobility, and cohesion for Los Angeles, the neighborhoods and people impacted by the constructed were construed as disabling to the city body politic (506). This (dis)ability discourse about freeways being enabling and good for the city in contrast to low-income and racialized neighborhoods being disabling and damaging allowed for the destruction of many communities, displacement of people, and an increase in pollution and toxins via construction and freeway traffic in these areas. In this work I highlight the environmental racism and “violence enacted through ostensibly neutral urban policy” and critique “the racially uneven consequences of urban redevelopment and disproportionate toxic load borne by racialized communities” with strong attention to disablement and women of color (512).

As these examples show, discourse never remains exclusively in the realm of ideology or language alone. Instead, discourse justifies and shores up structural power relations, leading to eventual material impact on marginalized people, such as harsh immigration policies and ill treatment of immigrants or the displacement of poor and racialized populations into neighborhoods subjected to increased amounts of environmental toxins. Discourses of disability, therefore, have real effects on women and people of color’s body-minds regardless of their disability identity or status, most often through the creation of structural exclusion, neglect, and other forms of state violence, the second domain of feminist-of-color disability studies.

### **State violence**

Due to the disabling impact of state violence, a feminist-of-color disability studies must go beyond an identity-based approach, which often centralizes the attainment of legal rights, such as those provided by the 1990 Americans

with Disabilities Act (ADA), the United States' first comprehensive civil rights law for disabled people. This law is often credited with ushering disability studies into the academy, and its conceptualization of disability initially shaped scholarly discussions of disability in favor of an identitarian model of minority difference centering questions of representation, legibility, and inclusion. Yet as Dean Spade and others have argued, rights-based platforms implicitly frame the nation-state as a site of protection, effectively erasing those members of the population who are regularly subject to state violence (Spade 2011). As such, these platforms tend to primarily benefit the most elite occupants of any given identity category while prioritizing assimilation into dominant institutions.

Instead of centering state-sanctioned understandings of disability, feminist-of-color disability studies would prioritize considerations of state violence attending to the intersection of disability politics with abolitionist and anticarceral frameworks. State apparatuses—prisons, police, schools, and welfare systems—rarely support the most precarious classes of people and, in fact, regularly brutalize those who are poor, undocumented, black, brown, disabled, trans, and/or gender nonconforming. Such apparatuses often operate as *themselves* instruments of mass disablement that disproportionately target black and brown populations.

Since at least the 1970s, the United States has witnessed the expansion of the carceral and punitive arms of the state alongside the retraction of welfare. The 1950s and 1960s ushered in the deinstitutionalization of state care, during which unprecedented numbers of disabled people in state-run psychiatric institutions became reliant on informal or community-based service networks and further at risk of police abuse.<sup>10</sup> In this revised landscape of state containment and neglect, disability functions as both a primary rationale for and a target of violence. As reported in the anthology *Disability Incarcerated*, “race and disability play a significant role in incarceration rates . . . more than half of all prison and jail inmates were reported to have a mental health problem” (Chapman, Carey, and Ben-Moshe 2014, 13). Further, for women, trans, and gender-nonconforming people of color, “police responses to mental health crises make up a significant proportion of . . . lethal encounters with police” (Ritchie 2017, 91). Indeed, the majority of people subjected to police violence are categorized as mentally or physically disabled, as actual or perceived disability has long motivated police violence

<sup>10</sup> As feminist-of-color disability studies scholars, we remain critical of state-run institutions for people with disabilities, but we also recognize that the deinstitutionalization movement and its shift to informal and community-based networks—as implemented—was an imperfect solution (Lewis 2005; Ben-Moshe, Chapman, and Carey 2014).

against people of color. Such subjects are more likely to be viewed as out of control, deranged, or mentally unstable, and such traits are more likely to be met with excessive force for racialized subjects (Schalk 2018, 79–82).

In addition to foregrounding disability in analyses of the carceral state, a feminist-of-color disability studies would broaden conversations around state-sanctioned violence beyond the usual suspects. Cohen argues that feminism, particularly black feminism, prompts us to ask, “what are the other examples of state violence or state oppression that we need to be paying attention to? . . . While there is a normative model of who we think about as the victim of state violence, which is often a heterosexual man in a confrontation with police, we know that state oppression manifests not only in that model. . . . It happens through the denial of state welfare assistance, and it happens in the ways we militarize the public schools that primarily black, Latino, and poor kids attend” (Cohen and Jackson 2016, 776). Building on these claims, a feminist-of-color *disability* framework underscores how ideologies of ability shape less visible processes of state violence such as antiwelfare policy, the school-to-prison pipeline, and infrastructural neglect.

Alongside antiblackness, anti-immigrant sentiment, and misogyny, discourses of disability and disease also gave narrative traction to antiwelfare policies such as the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). As Sanford F. Schram observes, PRWORA contributed considerably to the “medicalization” of welfare, as the act “helped accelerate the tendency to construct welfare dependency as an illness, thereby transforming welfare reform into a set of therapeutic interventions designed to cure people of a malady” (2000, 59). Further, the bogeymen of welfare reform—the so-called welfare queen, the undocumented migrant, and the disabled subject—were collectively imagined as drains on public resources and therefore disabling to the nation writ large. The welfare queen, for instance, demonstrates the cooperation of ableist reasoning alongside racialized sexual regulation. Feminist-of-color disability studies can make evident how this figure becomes legible through discourses of (dis)ability: she is defined as an incapable mother, a social aberrancy to be rehabilitated through workfare programs.

Turning to the militarization of public schools, critical race disability scholars have observed how the medical model of disability, combined with zero-tolerance policies, has disproportionately funneled black and brown students toward special education classrooms and alternative schools and how both function as precursors to (and outposts of) the prison-industrial complex (Erevelles 2014; Annamma 2017). In these spaces, Erevelles writes, “definitions of disability as intransigent pathology are used to justify segregation along the axes of race and class under the questionable guise of

‘special’ education and rehabilitation” (2014, 93). Here feminist-of-color disability studies can highlight how both antiwelfare policy and the school-to-prison pipeline instrumentalize the specter of disability in order to withhold life-sustaining resources from low-income and racialized communities. Further, in refusing to frame disability as pathology and challenging the ableist ideals of independence and productivity at the core of these punitive processes, feminist-of-color disability studies can also refute the collective ideological operations of ableism, racism, sexism, and classism upon which these processes turn.

Finally, a feminist-of-color disability studies would foreground state-sanctioned slow violence, such as infrastructural abandonment, that disproportionately produces disabling and/or debilitating conditions for communities of color.<sup>11</sup> Rob Nixon defines slow violence as that which “occurs gradually and out of sight . . . an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon 2011, 2). This mode of violence is operational in events such as the Flint water crisis. In Flint, the shifting of the city water source from the treated Detroit Water and Sewerage Department to the corrosive Flint River—a choice driven by state austerity measures and emergency management—resulted in widespread lead contamination. The crisis, which generated a public health state of emergency that continues to this day, demonstrates how disability is all too often a racialized process and historical event embedded in social, economic, and environmental inequities.

Within the domain of state violence, therefore, feminist-of-color disability studies attends not only to the direct violence of policing and incarceration but also to the slow violence targeting racialized populations through processes of state neglect as well as the ways in which health/care systems then manage the fallout of such processes. Feminist-of-color disability studies can also highlight the entanglements between state-sanctioned slow violence and systems of state care, where violence and care often become inseparable. For these reasons, we turn to health/care as our third domain.

### Health/care

While disability rights activists have fought for a reduction of the role of doctors and medical/health specialists in their lives, feminist and antiracist

<sup>11</sup> We use *debilitating* after Jasbir Puar to describe the wearing down of bodyminds, especially among populations deemed available for labor/resource extraction and exploitation. Puar develops the term *debilitation* to disrupt the Western, white underpinnings of the category of disability and to triangulate the disability/ability binary, arguing that certain populations, particularly nonwhite, non-Western, and poor people “may well be debilitated, in part by being foreclosed access to legibility and resources as disabled” (Puar 2017, xv).

health activists have historically had to fight for, first, access to medical care, such as in the black hospital movement and the women's clinic movement, and, second, for improved quality of care, that is, health care free from racial, gendered, sexual, and (dis)ability discrimination.<sup>12</sup> As a result, feminist-of-color disability studies must take a critical and expansive approach to health/care as one of its central domains. Of course, disability rights activists have long challenged the dehumanizing and ableist medical treatment of disabled people. Feminist disability studies scholars in particular, especially those working on chronic pain and mental disability, have been prominent in acknowledging the need to rethink the rejection of the medical industrial complex, adjusting approaches to the social model of disability, which was developed primarily by white heterosexual men with permanent, stable physical disabilities (Wendell 2001; Price 2015).<sup>13</sup>

Feminist-of-color disability studies can further these arguments by taking into account cultural and religious perspectives on wellness and healing, which may run counter to mainstream white disability studies as well as Western white medical perspectives on these issues.<sup>14</sup> For instance, a feminist-of-color disability studies approach can allow for a culturally attuned race, gender, and disability analysis of women-of-color wellness initiatives and organizations like Black Women's Wellness Day or the National Latina Health Organization, which seek to improve the overall health and wellness of specific racial communities through culturally specific public health initiatives. Such an approach would nuance any critique of the ableism common in public health work generally with attention to specific racial-gendered histories and circumstances that shape the discourses and practices of these race-specific health organizations.

Feminist-of-color disability studies can expand and complicate how we engage with health, medicine, and what Akemi Nishida calls "the U.S. public healthcare assemblage" (Nishida 2017). This assemblage includes not only disabled people receiving long-term care services (often through Medicaid and other state services) but also in-home care workers (who are predominantly poor, working class, and/or immigrant women of color) and the agencies that employ them. A feminist-of-color disability studies approach to the US public health-care assemblage would nuance existing feminist studies work on the feminization of care and existing feminist disability

<sup>12</sup> See Smith (1995), Silliman et al. (2004), and Nelson (2015).

<sup>13</sup> The social model of disability argues that disability is primarily a social and political issue requiring adaptation of or accommodations within the cultural and built environments rather than a personal, medical issue requiring changes to the body/mind.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Witherow (2005), Washington (2006), and Minich (2014).

studies work on care relationships for the disabled through attention to the race, class, and citizenship status of health/care workers.<sup>15</sup> As modeled in Nishida's work, feminist-of-color disability studies can balance attention to disabled people's rights to quality care, life in their own communities, and interdependence with critical, intersectional consideration of the lives of health/care workers whose physical labor can be debilitating. Such an approach to the US public health-care assemblage would remain staunchly critical of the social and political structures that exacerbate the vulnerability of disabled people and poor and immigrant women of color, making solidarity and coalition between these groups difficult.

Overall, health and health care within feminist-of-color disability studies must be understood expansively and analyzed within the contexts of race, gender, (dis)ability, sexuality, class, and citizenship status. This includes discussion of the health/care provider and recipient relationships mentioned above as well as the histories of medical experimentation on people of color and eugenics directed at disabled, poor, and nonwhite people. For many marginalized groups, approaches to medicine and health/care have always been directly tied to antiracist and feminist activism for the overall well-being and survival of a particular group. Activism, therefore, is the fourth and final central domain of feminist-of-color disability studies.

### **Activism**

Our final domain mirrors the conclusion of Garland-Thomson's (2002) essay, which similarly closes with a meditation on disability activism. We contend that a feminist-of-color disability studies aligns itself with radical organizing and cultural production conducted under the banner of disability justice. Disability justice, according to Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, names a "movement building framework of intersectional, revolutionary disability politics" (2018). Feminist-of-color disability studies ought to highlight and center writing, action, and organizing that operate from a disability justice perspective.

Several histories of the disability rights movement present disability activism as a teleological narrative, with the 1990 passage of the ADA serving as that narrative's apex (Shapiro 1994; O'Brien 2004; Davis 2015). This momentous piece of legislation was the hard-won result of decades of protest

<sup>15</sup> For scholarship on the feminization of care, see Wood (1994) and Adams (2010). For feminist disability studies approaches to care relationships, see Rainey (2011) and Kelly (2016). For scholarship on race and citizenship status among health/care workers, see Glenn (2010) and Fisher and Kang (2013).

by individuals and organizations like ADAPT (American Disabled for Accessible Public Transit), which continues disability rights activism in the present via protests against the so-called American Health Care Act in 2017, which aimed to partially repeal the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare. However, histories of disability rights organizing render evident the whiteness of leadership in this wave of disability rights activism.

In response to a white-dominated disability movement, an increasing number of voices have articulated the necessity of disability activism less centered on state legislation. As Mia Mingus writes, “I want us to tap into the transformative powers of disability, instead of only gaining access to the current system. . . . We don’t simply want to join the ranks of the privileged, we want to challenge and dismantle those ranks and question why some people are consistently at the bottom” (2017). Indeed, Mingus, Piepznasamarasinha, and others like Leroy Moore, Patty Berne, Eli Clare, Stacy Milbern, and Nomy Lamm have come to understand the disability rights movement as primarily geared toward “gaining access to the current system” (Mingus 2017). While these organizers note that “the disability rights movement has been crucial to the liberation of people with disabilities,” they have called for a movement attuned to structural oppression and multiply marginalized populations, one that challenges the capitalist ideals of independence and productivity at the core of rights-based reforms (Lamm 2015). These activists, artists, and intellectuals insist on a movement that decenters those who can gain access to rights through a legal-based framework. They call this new framework *disability justice*. Feminist-of-color disability studies aligns politically and intellectually with this approach, allowing disability justice activism to inform feminist-of-color disability studies scholarship.<sup>16</sup>

For proponents of disability justice, ableism is inextricable from white supremacy, patriarchy, heterosexism, transphobia, colonialism, and poverty. As a result, disability justice is an activist framework that centers the experiences of queer, trans, and/or racialized disabled people. The groundbreaking publication *Skin, Tooth, and Bone*, collectively authored by Bay Area activist and performance group Sins Invalid, lays out a working (and evolving) definition of disability justice as well as its ten central principles: intersectionality, leadership of the most impacted, anticapitalist politics, cross-movement solidarity, recognizing wholeness, sustainability, commitment to cross-disability solidarity,

<sup>16</sup> Many people and organizations have begun using the term *disability justice* in relation to any social justice work on disability issues. We want to make clear here that disability justice has a specific meaning grounded in intersectionality and the radical work of queer and racialized disabled activists.

interdependence, collective access, and collective liberation (Sins Invalid 2016, 16–19). This framework imagines a disability movement that radically revises what revolution looks like and that offers a blueprint for survival in our current moment of crisis.

What does this blueprint look like? It might look like a 2008 Sins Invalid performance, in which Cara Page, black queer cofounder of the healing justice collective Kindred, pulls a scroll of ableist slurs from the mouth of black disabled performer Leroy Moore, corraling their power through her forceful reading and sensual touch. Or it might look like “Open in Emergency,” the *Asian American Literary Review*’s 2017 special issue on mental health, which contains both a hacked DSM, which speaks back to white supremacist psychiatry, and a tarot deck, which offers alternate, artistic, and culturally attuned paths to healing and wellness (Khúc 2016). Or more broadly, it might spell out a complete overhaul of what the work of revolution even entails. For instance, in “A Babe-licious Healing Justice Statement,” the disability justice-centered BadAss Visionary Healers prioritize basic access and care needs, such as food, child care, and transportation, insisting that this access work is “not separate from the real work” (BadAss Visionary Healers 2013, 7). The disability justice perspective prioritized by feminist-of-color disability studies thus provokes reflection on the labor of revolution itself, prompting us to question why and how value accrues to certain forms of activist labor and to see the work of care, maintenance, and access as central to social change.

This blueprint further necessitates disability justice interventions into political organizing by people of color. Following the publication of the Movement for Black Lives’ political platform, the Harriet Tubman Collective, a group of Black disabled and Deaf organizers, released a statement addressing the platform’s inattention to disability—a concerning omission considering “the unspeakable violence found at the intersection of ableism, audism, and anti-black racism” (Harriet Tubman Collective 2016). A disability justice framework also intervenes into the seemingly intractable problem of inaccessible organizing, in which the work of activism all too often looks like “10-mile long marches [and] workshops that urge people to ‘get out of their seats and move!’” (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018). Feminist-of-color disability approaches to studying activism as a central domain or site of analysis, therefore, require us to recalibrate governing notions of activist labor, to address racism within disability activism and ableism within antiracist activism, and to shift our understanding of what constitutes intellectual labor and publication, as the majority of the citations in this section come from self-published and/or digital open-access sources. Feminist-of-color disability studies requires us to honor the knowledge, skills, and wisdom of multiply marginalized

disabled people. After all, in the words of Mingus, “*there is no liberation without disabled people*” (2017).

### **Onward**

Feminist-of-color disability studies is an emergent field in that only a few scholars explicitly situate their work at the intersection of disability studies, critical race studies, and feminist theory. And yet, feminists of color have an extended history of researching and theorizing (dis)ability broadly construed, offering invaluable but overlooked insights for feminist disability studies. The whiteness embedded in the history of feminist disability studies has shaped the field in significant and, we contend, limiting ways. First, since many feminist disability studies scholars primarily or predominantly cite theory by and about white people, this has negatively impacted the field’s ability to analyze the writing, history, and experiences of people of color. Second, since white and middle-class views and experiences of disability have shaped how feminist disability studies approaches the concept of disability, the field has been unable to properly recognize and engage with the extended history of feminist-of-color writing and theorizing about health, illness, and medicine as feminist disability studies work.

In this article we have engaged existing feminist-of-color work on (dis)ability to articulate feminist-of-color disability studies’ primary methods (ideology- rather than object-orientation, focus on [dis]ability as a system and disability as a relation to power rather than as identity, and emphasis on solidarity and coalition across social groups) and domains (discourse, state violence, health/care, and activism). We urge feminist disability studies scholars to cite more widely in feminist-of-color theory, recognizing that much feminist-of-color work on (dis)ability never uses the word *disability* at all but rather refers to specific impairments or focuses on health, illness, disease, wellness, and medicine in the context of a sexist and racist world. At the same time, we encourage feminists of color to more directly and explicitly engage the field of feminist disability studies in order to better analyze issues of (dis)ability from an explicitly politicized and antiableist perspective.

Our work here has been to identify potential sites of analysis and opportunities for cross-pollination between feminist-of-color scholarship and feminist disability studies. This work has required creative collaboration to envision the range of what feminist-of-color disability studies might entail, combining our distinct areas of expertise and experience as disabled and non-disabled queer women of color working in the fields of feminist disability studies and critical race theory. Given our bases in US feminist-of-color scholarship, we want to emphasize that, in addition to the areas we have identified,

future feminist-of-color disability studies work needs to engage transnational and postcolonial perspectives. We also see great potential for feminist-of-color disability studies to contribute to the history of science and medicine and to contemporary science and technology studies in particular. We hope this article provides the foundation necessary for future feminist-of-color disability studies scholarship in a variety of disciplines that would benefit from this emergent field's vital perspectives on the roles of race, gender, and (dis)ability in our past, our present, and our futures.

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