

Reimagining Disability as Knowledge: Empowerment and Identity in Selected Speculative Fiction

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Abstract—This paper analyzes the representation of disability as knowledge in two speculative fiction narratives, Annalee Newitz's *Autonomous* (2017) and Robert Venditti's *The Surrogates* (2006). Drawing upon disability studies theories, specifically Crip Theory, Cripistemology, and Crip Technoscience, this paper explains that in each work, disability is not understood as a deficit or lack; instead, disability is portrayed as a difference, an affirmative source of power, agency, and knowledge production (Johnson & McRuer, 2014). In *Autonomous*, the disabled heroine, Jack, uses biohacking to gain freedom, turning her body into a weapon and undermining her personhood. Meanwhile, *The Surrogates* serves as a scathing commentary on the technology industry and the beauty standards it promotes, as well as the plight of physically challenged persons in the computer-mediated avatar environment that favors the physically fit. By closely examining these texts, the paper demonstrates how they enable new modes of representing disability, which are made possible by digital and cybernetic bodies, and urges a future in which disability will be accepted as a form of human diversity and knowledge (Newitz, 2017). This paper contributes to the ongoing conversations in disability studies about how speculative fiction can challenge and expand our understandings of disability, alternative ways of knowing technology, embodiment, and justice (Siebers, 2008).

Index Terms—crip theory, biohacking, disability representation, speculative fiction

I. INTRODUCTION

Disabilities have historically been perceived through a medical lens, in which individual "deficiencies" were seen as things to be overcome and "repaired" (Goggin & Newell, 2005). This is the kind of view that treats disabled people as little more than the receptacles of care and measures their lives in terms of what they cannot do. Recent work in the field of Disability Studies, especially in terms of crip and disability epistemology, challenges this restricted view. Theorists such as Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer have introduced the idea of cripistemology, where disability is not simply a deficit in need of healing but a system of knowledge (Johnson & McRuer, 2014). This system is based on the experiences of people with disabilities, who bring knowledge about different ways of making sense of and constructing society, politics, and technology through their embodied understandings (Siebers, 2008). In this model, disability serves to expose the constructed nature of societal norms by deconstructing and reconstructing our understanding of the world, along with the values associated with it. It challenges conventional ideas about human beings and their ways of being and doing, while also playing a role in (re)producing norms, particularly those related to abilities (Goggin & Newell, 2005).

Derived from this theoretical gaze is the concept of crip technoscience, established by Aimi Hamraie. Simi Linton examines the uses of technology by disabled people, as they modify and reconfigure technology to suit their own needs, which unsettles hegemonic technological forms. This gaze challenges the normative view of disability as something to be neutralized or remediated with technology. Instead, it acknowledges how disabled individuals use technology to improve their lives, making them more accessible to themselves and providing innovative solutions that not only meet personal requirements but also challenge the social role of what personal tastes should or should not do (Hamraie, 2017; Linton, 2015).

This perspective also sets the groundwork for a future that resists the exclusion of disability. Alison Kafer's notion of the *crip future* advocates for an alternative future where disability is not something to be erased from existence but rather is seen as a crucial component in realizing true diversity within humanity (Kafer, 2013).

This paper addresses these issues by analyzing two works in speculative fiction: Annalee Newitz's *Autonomous* (2017) and Robert Venditti's *The Surrogates* (2006). By placing these texts within the contexts of futuristically imagined technological communities, these narratives of disability offer a powerful, nuanced vision that sees disability not as something to be solved, but as something that generates knowledge, agency, and resistance. Both works reject a technocapableist narrative in which the goal of technology is to eradicate disability, and both refuse to imagine a world in which disabled characters are excluded from thinkers, problem-solvers, or change agents. For example, in *Autonomous*, Jack is a pain slave who longs for the torture that induces pleasure and serves as a political sensor for the war against pharmaceutical capitalism. *The Surrogates* does not embrace the "perfect" avatars that society idealizes, nor do its characters conform to the "superhuman" mold that technology promises. These figures exemplify crip technoscience, and they remake what it means to be entangled with technoscientific objects (Venditti, 2006; Newitz, 2017).

The research problem of this study is the under-representation and misrepresentation of disability in speculative genres, particularly in the context of digital media and gaming narratives, where disabled characters are often absent or stereotyped as villains. These stories use disability as a trope or narrative device, cyborgs as broken bodies needing repair, villains who are disabled and should be pitied, and disabled beings who should be erased from the narrative. These portrayals perpetuate damaging clichés and silence the epistemic agency of disabled people. This paper contends that digital and gaming narratives have much to gain in incorporating disability as a crucial epistemic modality, unmasking the crip forms found in *Autonomous* and *The Surrogates* to speculate on the futures in which disability is not only tolerated but is also recognized as integral to the production of knowledge, technological advancement, and critical social commentary (Siebers, 2008).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Disability Representation in Literature

Traditionally, disability in literature was influenced by social attitudes that positioned it as a tragedy or state of being that required pity. Such representation is often also grounded in medical model assumptions about disability; disability is characterized as an individual problem that needs to be "fixed" or cured. Disabled characters tend to be crippled old men or boys, and their disability is portrayed as either an indication of moral superiority or evil, to create an air of pathos, or to illustrate the depravity of the character. For example, figures such as Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* personify human rejection, and their disabilities shape their stories (Siebers, 2008; Garland-Thomson, 1997).

This is in stark contrast to post-World War II literature, which began depicting disabled characters as more nuanced, multidimensional figures, with stories that contested previous depictions. Disability studies scholars such as Tobin Siebers and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson have criticized the representation of disability as a metaphor in literature, showing how it is often complicit with ableism. For instance, Siebers (2008) replaces disability with political identity as a locus and argues that disabled people need not be excluded from society; they should be included in society, not secluded.

Despite this history, able-bodied literature continues to have difficulty portraying disability as anything other than a handicap or burden. The problem in literature now is writing stories from an impaired viewpoint without reducing the individual to their impairment; rather, they are portrayed as an individual with desires, dreams, and a purpose in society (Garland-Thomson, 1997).

B. Disability in Digital and Gaming Narratives

Expanding on Crip Theory, Cripistemology, and Crip Technoscience within the context of digital and gaming narratives, disability provides an avenue for imagining it as a form of knowledge and power, rather than something that needs repaired. The development of digital media, the game, and informatics has introduced a new regime of representation for disability. In the era of avatars, cyberspace, and digital identities, these elements allow characters to transcend the physical body and achieve things that would be impossible in the material world. In works such as *Ready Player One*, *The Surrogates*, and *Autonomous*, the virtual environment becomes a place where normative modalities of being able-bodied are not only challenged but also exceeded, enabling characters to surmount bodily restrictions and engage with the world in inventive ways (Cline, 2011; Venditti, 2006; Newitz, 2017).

In *Ready Player One*, the novel's hero, Wade Watts, is crippled by his physical world, but that all changes when he discovers OASIS, where his avatar is more important than the body he was born in (Cline, 2011). In *The Surrogates*, meanwhile, people, interacting through robotic avatars, can leave behind the burdensome, aging human form and choose instead to live in an obsolete reality. These avatars creatively speculate on identity and embodiment in a technologically saturated society (Venditti, 2006).

Autonomous features a woman named Jack who lives with chronic pain; the experience of her embodiment is a fundamental aspect of her character. She uses biohacking as a means of critiquing capitalist systems that profit from disabled bodies. These works seek to understand disability not as a barrier but as a source of resistance and innovation, reforming both societal and technological conventions (Newitz, 2017).

The cyborg body in the digital fiction may, however, be offered as a space for new autonomy and new kinds of agency. However, these representations also raise ethical questions around technology, control, and the effects of idealizing perfect

bodies in futuristic cultures. In *The Surrogates*, avatars lead to concerns of identity disintegration, spectatorial alienation, or perhaps even a dependence on technological evasion (Venditti, 2006).

C. Existing Research on Disability in Digital Spaces

The convergence of disability and digital media is increasingly an area of growth within the fields of disability studies and digital culture studies. The work of scholars like Simi Linton and Aimi Hamraie highlights how digital technologies support disabled people and provide tools to rethink their experiences of the body (Linton, 2015; Hamraie, 2017). Hamraie's investigation of crip technoscience highlights how disabled people adapt new uses for technology that disrupt normative models of autonomy and efficiency (Hamraie, 2017).

Digital platforms, especially gaming and virtual worlds, present new possibilities for representation. These design spaces enable disabled people to own an identity and articulate themselves in a way that captures their lived experiences, disrupting ableist assumptions of bodies and technology (Linton, 2015). Although gaming is now more inclusive through features such as reconfigurable controls and accessibility technology, more work is needed for disability to be more historically embraced in the gaming narrative and structure (Shaw, 2014).

While research on (in)accessible digital spaces and disability is expanding, for the most part, it locates disability within a frame of access, considering "people with disabilities and their access to the technologies of which non-disabled people can avail themselves" (Elcessor, 2016). This paper extends this research by examining how dystopian digital fictions, such as *Autonomous* and *The Surrogates*, work to realign narratives and provide alternate sites at which disability can be represented and valued (Newitz, 2017; Venditti, 2006).

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is approached through multiple theoretical and overlapping lenses at the juncture of disability studies, technology, and identity. Central to this is Crip Theory, which challenges the traditional discourse of disability as lack, instead positioning it as an identity and a way of knowing and way of being in the world (McRuer, 2006). Cripistemology, a framework that is "defined as the body of knowledge, experiences, and ways of knowing emerging from the lived experiences and knowledges of disabled bodies," serves as the foundation for a theory that embraces alternative ways of knowing as it is embodied (Johnson & McRuer, 2014). Hamraie's (2017) concept of Crip Technoscience is also instructive in this respect: the idea of technology reuse by disabled people as a way of creating access, while also "making the technology do something else" offers a reconfiguration of agency. These frameworks are used to challenge the ableist representations of disability in the literature and film discussed above.

Moreover, the Medical Model of Disability, frequently critiqued for framing disability as a lack that requires fixing, is problematized by the techno-empowerment narratives of biohacking and cybernetics depicted in these texts (Shakespeare, 2006). The last of these critiques is of Neoliberal Biopower and Techno-Utopianism, which celebrate the "normal" body while ignoring the potential for disability as either resistance or innovation (Foucault, 2008). In combination, these theories form a strong foundation for exploring the representation of disability in digital and speculative realms.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This paper utilizes a close-reading, qualitative approach grounded in disability studies and literary analysis to investigate the representation of disability as knowledge in *Autonomous* by Annalee Newitz and *The Surrogates* by Robert Venditti. The methodological perspective is inspired by paradigms developed by various critical theories within disability studies, such as Crip Theory, Cripistemology, and Crip Technoscience, which critically question ableist discourses and provide alternative narratives about dis/abling as a place of empowerment and agency (Hamraie, 2017; Linton, 2015).

The main mode of analysis consists of close readings of selected large sections from both novels where disabled characters interact with technology. This reading is informed by the theoretical groundwork outlined above, as it is applied to understand instances in which disability is modeled not as a lack but as a form of knowledge and resistance. In *Autonomous*, the focus is on the way Jack appropriates biohacking to reconstruct her own identity, while *The Surrogates* acts as a criticism of the erasure of disability using cybernetic avatars (Newitz, 2017; Venditti, 2006).

In addition to comparing the two texts, the analysis explores representations of disability in different speculative narratives. This comparative gesture illuminates how both works undermine or support ableist expectations of technology and embodiment. The analysis draws upon transhumanism and digital culture studies and considers the implications of disability in technological and societal realms (Shaw, 2014; Bostrom, 2005).

Research Questions

The following research questions are addressed in this paper:

1. How do *Autonomous* and *The Surrogates* describe disability as embodied knowledge rather than a problem to solve?
2. How do these texts undermine the techno-ableist assumptions that are part and parcel of so many futuristic stories?
3. How can digital and gaming stories transcend tokenized representation and fully incorporate disability as a key metaphor for understanding technology and agency?

In engaging with these questions, this paper aims to argue for the potential of speculative fiction to resist ableist futures and imagine worlds where disability is not just present but also disruptively generative. Such texts serve both as forums for critical reflection and as alternative visions of what future technologies might be, informed by the experiences of disabled people. Disability is not a problem to be solved but a wellspring of innovation and resistance, providing alternative ways of thinking about the nexus between technology, embodiment, and justice (Newitz, 2017; Venditti, 2006; Kafer, 2013).

In examining *Autonomous* and *The Surrogates*, this paper employs a disability studies approach with close reading to explore how the fiction represents disabled characters and their engagement with technology. It also draws upon transhumanist and digital culture studies to consider disability's relation to discourses concerning technological progress, social change, and amelioration. By framing disability as a site of knowledge production and empowerment, creators and scholars can explore how digital and speculative media might transform our encounters with technology, shaping future worlds in ways that either enable or disable them (Newitz, 2017; Venditti, 2006; Bostrom, 2005).

Further, through a review of the secondary literature, this study also considers the representation of disability in digital media. Thinkers such as Simi Linton and Aimi Hamraie have written about how the internet can allow disabled people to take back their agency. This literature informs the theorization of the study and locates an analysis of disability in both *Autonomous* and *The Surrogates* (Linton, 2015; Hamraie, 2017).

Ultimately, the entire methodological approach seeks to reveal how speculative fiction functions as a medium of epistemic resistance, highlighting disability as knowledge, resistance, and transformation.

V. RESULTS

A. Analysis of *Autonomous* by Annalee Newitz

Autonomous (Newitz, 2017) is a mind-expanding futuristic science fiction title set in a future where biotechnology, biopiracy, and intellectual property (IP) converge in a dystopic capitalist landscape ruled by mega-pharmaceutical companies. Jack, the protagonist, is a disabled biohacker, someone who breaks through the control of corporate power. In a world where genetic engineering, body modification, and human enhancement are being embraced by the powers that be, Jack pursues a dangerous quest to help outpatients by undermining the persecutors of her clients, reprogramming her body in the process. As a biohacker, Jack carries not just unlicensed prescription meds but also alters her own body into a lab, loading it with chemicals and heavy-duty equipment.

At the core of the novel is the question of disability and the collective ownership over disabled bodies. For Jack, biohacking is about reclaiming control over her body and refusing to let social constraints define her. The novel examines how biohacking can be a form of empowerment and resistance, especially for people with disabilities. In the case of Jack, she alters her body to relieve chronic pain and empower herself; furthermore, she also challenges mainstream concepts of the human body and conventionally acceptable norms of embodiment.

Jack's modding transforms the novel into a conceptual exploration of the relationship between body, identity, and technology. In *Autonomous*, disability is not a problem to be resolved but a space of agency, invention, and self-actualization.

(a). Disability as Knowledge Through Biohacking

One of the primary focuses of *Autonomous* is redefining disability. Disability in traditional Western medicine is often framed as a flaw, a defect that can be fixed or healed. The medical model of disability is a conceptual model in which those living with such conditions are treated medically. Yet in *Autonomous*, Newitz pushes back against this reading of biohacking by staging it as an expression of what Hamraie and Fritsch (2019) call *crip technoscience*. Biohacking is portrayed as a form of resistance. A form of empowerment for people with disabilities to once again take charge of their bodies and modify and customize their bodies to their liking.

For Jack, the decision to biohack her own body is not about obliterating her disability, but rather, capitalizing on her body's limitations and turning them into strengths. Jack, as a disabled body, has always been the object of medical intervention meant to "fix" her body. However, she rejects such remedies and embraces the very condition her body is in, seeing it as right for her. Through this, she works to change the framing of disability as an epistemic source. In altering her body rather than "fixing" it, Jack reclaims her body as a locus of self-determined knowledge, where the very limits placed on her disability become a kind of embodied wisdom.

A key quote from Jack encapsulates this shift in thinking: "We don't fix bodies; we let them become what they need to be" (Newitz, 2017, p. 142).

This statement marks a radical shift in vision. Instead of striving to overcome the limitations of disability, Jack thinks of her modifications as a way for her to grow and move forward, better understanding her body and who she is. "Disability is reimagined as an identity and a long and complex process of becoming, rather than something to be fixed or overcome," as Johnson and McRuer (2014) state.

Jack's biohacking experience can be accounted for through a *cripistemological* frame (Johnson & McRuer, 2014), which suggests that disabled bodies produce different forms of knowledge. When Jack reflects, "I don't feel alone when I feel his body," it is because Jack's body is not the site of an absence but a site of new understandings and new ways of

being in the world (Newitz, 2017, p. 142). Embracing her deformed body and hacking and rewiring it, Jack subverts the hegemony of medical and scientific knowledge and creates a site of disabled agency and knowledge production.

(b). *Empowerment Through Self-Modification*

One of the amazing things about *Autonomous* is this notion that what Jack is doing is kind of, in some ways, biohacking, or at least close to that, and it's a kind of empowerment for Jack as well. For Jack, altering her body is an act of self-definition. In a world where people, particularly people with disabilities, have been so locked in by corporate and government interests, Jack's biohacking is a means of refusing to be controlled by all of that and allowing herself a certain space to have agency over her own body (Newitz, 2017). Unlike prevalent narratives that presuppose that disability must be corrected or remediated, Jack co-opts biohacking as a means toward self-empowerment and personal control over identity.

Jack can use biohacking to gain physical empowerment, which also leads to emotional and psychological empowerment. She takes drugs to dull the chronic pain racking her body and performance-enhancing drugs to enhance her overall physical achievement, moving into new heights of self-discipline and perfectionism while fleeing a society that sees her as disabled and therefore less than whole. By remaking her body on her terms, Jack can refuse the cultural dictate that disabled bodies must be patched and straightened out (Newitz, 2017).

The idea of empowerment/self-modification is a companion of, or an outgrowth of, the libertarian concept of radical autonomy. Jack's journey, both personal and physical, is about self-liberation. In altering her body, Jack makes the case that disability is not a fixed state but a mutable and malleable one. Her transformation is a revolutionary self-discipline no longer compliant with the socially accepted disabled body. She tells her body new stories instead and negotiates a new story for her body. This is complementary to agency, autonomy, and power.

In this way, what Jack decides to hack in *Autonomous* is a profound challenge to discourses that understand disability as a problem crying out for a solution. Jack doesn't try to mold her body to the ideal body, as is traditionally done; Jack fights the imperfection of her body and creates the new perfect version of herself through biohacking instead. Her changed body is something that gives her strength, not makes her feel weak (Newitz, 2017).

(c). *Subverting Dominant Ideologies: Disability, Autonomy, and Technology in Autonomous*

In *Autonomous*, Annalee Newitz meddles with the story to disrupt perceived ideas about disability, autonomy, and technology. Through the character of Jack and the world she inhabits through Brody and the creation of the novel, Newitz interrogates the "environmentations" that frame the othering of disability and the medicalization that accompanies such a positioning, an issue society has yet to. In doing so, she also calls into question the neoliberal notion of individuality and the techno-utopian longing for a standard of perfection offered through technology (Newitz, 2017). These criticisms are not only essential to how the novel's characters are shaped and the themes explored, but they are also an important social commentary that highlights how disability is viewed within today's society.

Table 1 shows a comparative analysis of how *Autonomous* reconceptualizes disability in relation to three dominant narratives: the medical model of disability, neoliberal autonomy, and techno-utopianism. Although these criticisms are tightly linked to major plot points and character development, they underscore the novel's demand for a more expansive and empowering conception of disability.

TABLE 1
SUBVERSION OF DOMINANT IDEOLOGIES IN THE NOVEL *AUTONOMOUS* THROUGH DISABILITY REPRESENTATION

No.	Ideology	Subversion in <i>Autonomous</i> (Through Characters, Plot, and Themes)
1	Medical Model of Disability	Reimagining Disability: Rather than treating disability as a problem to be solved, Newitz employs Jack's biohacking to destabilize the medicalization of the disabled body. Jack revels in her disability, remaking her body—not to fit in, but to overcome. "We don't repair bodies; we let them get what they need," Jack insists (Newitz, 2017, p. 142). This repositions disability from being a locus of "lack" towards one of self-defined strength and creativity.
2	Neoliberal Autonomy	Resistant to Capitalism: In the neoliberal world of <i>Autonomous</i> , where people like to think they should just work super hard and tune their bodies for success, Jack's a monkey wrench in that. With biohacking, she reconfigures empowerment as not individualistic self-optimization but as collective refusal to capitulate to capitalism's exploitation of disabled bodies. Newitz, in contrast, makes it a point when she frames biohacking as a form of resistance to the dictates of capitalism: "Jack's biohacking joining the left" (Newitz, 2017, p. 197).
3	Techno-Utopianism	Critique of Capitalist Techno-Solutions: <i>Autonomous</i> challenges the techno-utopian belief that technology, particularly biotechnology, is a neutral force for good. Newitz reveals it as a tool of capitalist control, where "perfect" health is a commodity and bodies are engineered for profit, not liberation. The novel argues that a system designed to create perfect, efficient humans is ultimately a system of oppression: "You can't design a perfect human. You can only design a human that's perfect for a particular system. And then you have to ask yourself, is that a system I want to be a part of?" (Newitz, 2017, p. 312).

Newitz's (2017) novel *Autonomous* presents a radical restructuring of disability that stands outside normalized medical procedures of "fixing" disabled bodies. The character Jack illustrates how biohacking can serve as a means of enabling individuals to construct lives on their terms. By accepting her body's limitations and redesigning it according to her standards, Jack demonstrates that disability is not a problem to be solved, nor merely a site of agency, but a space where knowledge is produced and where liberation from psychonormativity and negativity becomes possible.

Newitz also rejects the three dominant epistemologies they identify—medical, neoliberal, and techno-utopian—in favor of an alternative narrative of disability that centers self-representation, collective struggle, and alternative epistemologies. Annalee Newitz's *Autonomous*, in contrast, exemplifies Zakiya's challenge to standard theories of disability by imagining disability as a space of invention, resistance, and epistemic possibility. Rather than representing the disabled body as something to be cured or cleared from harm, Newitz imagines it as a location for self-motivated action and self-determination, where the disabled body can be imagined anew and where it can be reconfigured to suit the whims and necessities of individuals. The protagonist, Jack, alters her body through biohacking, making her an example of this resistance. She does not aspire to "fix" her disability; instead, she adapts to a body that makes her powerful: "We don't perfect bodies, we let them be what they want to become" (Newitz, 2017, p. 142). This constitutes a challenge to the "medical model," which historically perceives disability as something to be treated and cured. Instead, Jack's biohacking becomes an act of resistance to social norms, and disability becomes a state of superior personal power and understanding (Newitz, 2017).

Moreover, there is something here for everyone: for the general reader of the medical and capitalist systems that manage themselves, and more specifically for critical disability and medical scholars sympathetic to empirically grounded work in disability studies. Yet, *Autonomous* is more than just a critique of the medical and capitalist regimes that control the bodily; it is a rearticulation of disability as knowledge, as power. In biohacking a model of disability, the novel posits disability as an ever-evolving, liquid, and non-linear process. The changing body of Jack is not just a process of "healing," but also of self-assertion and refusal to conform to the normative ideals of perfection and the so-called average. This fluidity challenges the linear narratives of disability, which typically expect it to be a fixed and fixable state. As Newitz (2017) writes, "Disability is reimagined as an identity and a long and complex process of becoming, rather than something to be fixed or overcome" (p. 142). In doing so, the novel suggests that disability is, instead of a constraining deficiency, a locus of agency, one that can grow and mutate, allowing agents to reconfigure their bodies in ways that confound conventional constructs of "normalcy" and "wellness".

B. *Analysis of The Surrogates by Robert Venditti*

The Surrogates (Venditti, 2005) is a comics work that takes place in a world where surrogates replace the human body in everyday life, while humans in another society live without such surrogates. These surrogates effectively enable people to experience life through mechanized, humanoid puppets, which they can control and experience vicariously while sitting at home, safe and sound. In this world, human beings are no longer physically engaged with outside reality using their bodies; surrogate bodies are used to do everything, from working and socializing to all aspects of life.

Cybernetic surrogates are based on the idea that someone gets a "perfected" body that does not have the restrictions and corresponding vulnerabilities of a human body. As the novel states, "No more sickness. No more disability. Just perfect versions of ourselves" (Venditti, 2005). Thus, in theory, the surrogates can live forever; if not indestructible, then they are nearly so. Each surrogate exists as a perfect image of the human form, and all are immune to age, sickness, and disability. The book delves into the social aspect of that possibility, as well as the resulting psychological, moral, and philosophical outcomes of living as a form of digital self (Venditti, 2005).

The Surrogates illustrates an interesting view of disability that is slightly problematic. By opening up the possibility of replacing our actual, physical bodies with robotic surrogates, the novel suggests how disability is understood in a world where the body is no longer the central site of our encounters with the world. As a character observes, "No one has to be broken down anymore" (Venditti, 2005, p. 34). Disability is erased in this society; in the case of surrogates, disabled bodies have to be overcome, replaced, or discarded (Venditti, 2005).

The text grapples with this complicated relationship between disability and the body and asks whether technology is a form of empowerment for disability, willing into cyborg surrogates, or if it is a way to exploit and erase the messy, lived culture of the disabled in favor of an ideal, digital perfection (Venditti, 2005). This tension is captured in the contrasting views presented in the novel: while surrogates offer "freedom, no pain, no limits" (Venditti, 2005, p. 45), critics argue that "you can't heal a society by pretending its problems don't exist" (Venditti, 2005, p. 92). The economic dimension is also highlighted through the pointed remark that "Only the rich get to be perfect" (Venditti, 2005, p. 78), exposing how this technological "solution" creates new forms of inequality.

(a). *Disability and the Cybernetic Body*

The cybernetic body, which is not biological but mechanical, is one of the recurring motifs in *The Surrogates*. For disabled people, using surrogates is a gateway to freedom from the confines of their physical bodies. Surrogates are capable of mobility without physical limitations or restrictions and possess this constructed, idealized model of the human physique that society defines as "normal" or otherwise "acceptable".

One may think of using surrogates to empower oneself. The disabled characters in the tale can explore the world as if they had "normal" anatomy, functioning in society without the physical limitations of their disabilities. This would be a tremendous opportunity for many to experience life in a way that the typical human body, constrained by illness or injury, may not permit. In the virtual world, they can break their real-world chains and live as a perfected avatar. This is how the body of the future may work, reaching through the cyborgian calabash to pull out the chrysalis of liberation, at least for the disabled people: the chrysalis world that was always already there, behind, or inside, or beyond the blacklist and the black ghetto, where Black and disabled people are kept; if not together, in connection, then apart.

However, surrogate use is not without its problems. After all, “the emptying of the disabled body in favor of a cybernetic, idealized one can be seen as essential exploitation” (Venditti, 2005, p. 67). The societal rejection of the disabled body is evident, as society is effectively replacing the real-life disabled body with a robotic one, which sends the message that you’re not good enough as you are and that your body exists as second best to a “perfect” one. This raises the critical question: Whose disabled body are we talking about, and does utilizing surrogates not play into a larger dehumanization of disabled people by arguing that even their bodies aren't sufficient?

It is in this context that the notion of cybernetic embodiment is more complicated than one of empowerment. It risks maneuvering the disabled body itself into something that must be fixed, removed, or transcended, rather than something that can be embraced or celebrated for its authenticity. These surrogates in the book come to represent the lack that, in the supposed real world, being disabled is to be “less than” and “incomplete,” and that the only way to be a productive member of society is to have a perfect, machine-produced avatar.

A relevant quote from the novel captures this tension: "In a world of surrogates, there is no such thing as disability" (Venditti, 2005). This quotation encapsulates the key concept of the book: in a world where people can no longer engage with the world through their bodies, disability is obliterated, and the concept of what it is to be a human is irrevocably changed. In a mean world of substitutes, the disabled body is treated as an obstruction to be conquered or overlooked, not something to be felt or even accepted. The erasure of disability in an idealized, cybernetic form calls into question the concept of humanity itself and dismisses the wide variation of lived experiences that disability represents (Venditti, 2005).

(b). Digital Spaces as Sites of Empowerment or Erasure

The novel questions whether the transfer of disabled bodies to cyborg avatars is a true form of empowerment or a form of disempowerment that negates the disabled perspective. At the heart of this tension is what digital worlds and digital bodies tell us about human potential and whether they provide any real solution to human limitation.

On the one hand, there is power in the use of surrogates. The idea of disabled people living in a perfect body (one that works as if physical impairments did not beleague the body) provides a different form of agency. Disabled individuals have access to a world from which they are usually excluded or to which they are usually only marginally connected because of their physical difference. The surrogate body permits the standard quality of life, meaning living without the physical limitations that a disability brings, and provides access to a society that may deem a disabled body as lacking.

On the other hand, this is a disempowerment since it erases the disabled identity. The ideal machine silences the real body and makes an avatar, in which we live the life of disability. Disability is no longer something to know, acknowledge, or embrace as a part of society; it has become something to conceal beneath an impenetrable exterior of perfection, lifeless as a machine. This digital proxy can also cause disabled people to feel detached if they have already been socialized to regard disability as a lack. While the substitute body makes life more ideal, entering it also potentially further severs individuals from their bodies, leaving them in digitized surroundings that strip their physical lives and their online avatars apart from one another.

The perfect body that surrogates offer society is without disability or authenticity. It is a body that is not being lived; it is a body that exists not for itself, but simply to project a (nonexistent) ideal of perfection onto the world. The more one uses surrogates, the further away from our humanity one is and the less one can understand, for instance, what it is to live in a disabled person’s experience.

(c). Critique of Idealized Bodies

The Surrogates is critical of a culture that has chosen to eliminate disability by making the perfect digital body the measure of value and being. The novel undermines the concept of "human" by depicting the surrogate body as the ideal, flawless form of the human body. The book's advertised body appears to reject the limitations and imperfections of the human, natural body, creating a society whereby the ideal becomes the imperative.

The issue with this perspective is that it requires people to measure up to an ideal of perfection that does not exist. For disabled individuals, that standard is a daily reminder that their bodies are not “normal” but are instead broken or missing something. The surrogacy of the body is raised to the level of an oppressive ideal, imposing on people the choice between embracing a digital self and remaining outside or on the margins.

The society in *The Surrogates* reflects the fundamental ableism of our world, where disabled people are frequently not able to participate in mainstream life fully, not because of their abilities, but because of how culture perceives the imperfections in their bodies. In replacing disability with an ideal digital body, the novel critiques the exact societal impulse to erase or disregard the writing of a disabled experience on a body, distilling it to a set of attributes that must be perfected to be tolerated.

The Surrogates by Robert Venditti presents a dystopian view of the future where the idealized, cybernetic body replaces the human form, and disability is erased using surrogates. While the novel suggests that the use of cybernetic surrogates may offer a form of empowerment for disabled individuals by allowing them to experience life without the limitations imposed by their bodies, it also critiques the erasure of disability as a form of exploitation. In a world where the disabled body is replaced with a perfect digital version, the novel asks difficult questions about identity, authenticity, and empowerment.

Ultimately, *The Surrogates* critiques a society that seeks to eliminate disability by presenting the cybernetic body as ideal, free of the imperfections and limitations of the real world. While the use of surrogates offers a means of escape

from physical disability, it also raises ethical questions about the value of the disabled body and what it means to truly empower individuals without erasing their lived experiences. The novel forces readers to reflect on the role of technology in shaping society's views on disability and the implications of creating a world where perfected avatars are the standard.

C. *Disability and Digital Worlds as Sites of Knowledge*

(a). *Digital Avatars and Identity Construction*

The integration of digital avatars and cybernetic bodies in speculative narratives offers powerful tools for identity construction. These avatars allow characters to transcend the physical limitations of their bodies and adopt new identities, enabling them to engage with the world in ways that are not possible in their physical form. In works like *Autonomous* by Annalee Newitz and *The Surrogates* by Robert Venditti, these digital or cybernetic identities become not just a means of physical interaction but a method for personal reinvention and the construction of new, alternative identities (Newitz, 2017; Venditti, 2005).

In these works, digital avatars and cybernetic bodies are representations that allow characters to remake themselves, shedding the limitations imposed by their real-world bodies. For disabled characters, the digital realm offers an opportunity to escape the confines of their physical disabilities. By utilizing avatars, characters can engage with the world in ways that are not possible for their physical bodies. These digital surrogates or avatars are seen as idealized representations—perfected versions of their users that are free from physical impairments. As a result, the avatars often serve as powerful tools for identity construction, providing individuals with the opportunity to redefine themselves and their interactions with the world (Newitz, 2017; Venditti, 2005).

In *The Surrogates*, the cybernetic bodies used by individuals are seen as a means to perfectly embody a new self, one that is liberated from the limitations of disability, aging, or physical trauma. The characters control these avatars remotely, and through their avatars, they can experience the world as idealized versions of themselves. The process of engaging in this idealized identity construction is a form of empowerment—a way to inhabit a body that is free from imperfections (Venditti, 2005).

Similarly, in *Autonomous*, the protagonist Jack chooses to modify her body using biohacking as a way to reshape her identity. Though not exactly avatars in the traditional sense, Jack's modified body becomes a tool for self-transformation and self-representation. The digital or cybernetic possibilities in these worlds allow characters to become versions of themselves that reflect their desires, needs, and aspirations rather than the limitations imposed by their natural, biological forms (Newitz, 2017).

For disabled individuals in these narratives, digital avatars represent more than just technological advancements. They provide a way of escaping societal limitations placed on disabled bodies, offering characters the ability to construct an identity that is not defined by physical impairments. These avatars become extensions of the self that offer an opportunity for greater agency and empowerment, allowing characters to move beyond the constraints of their physical bodies and enter a new realm of possibilities (Newitz, 2017; Venditti, 2005).

(b). *Virtual Spaces as Epistemic Resistance*

Digital worlds in *Autonomous* and *The Surrogates* are, beyond being a tool for identity performance, also epistemic spaces of resistance. In such digital spheres, characters can reassert their agency, resist stereotypical social constructions of disability, and construct the disabled body not as something to be cured or driven out. Instead, in these digital realms, characters refuse the conventional modes of knowing and being that have been used throughout history to marginalize and obliterate their experiences, and they create alternative modes of being and knowing in the world (Newitz, 2017; Venditti, 2005).

The notion of epistemic resistance in these texts emphasizes that knowledge is not a universally applicable entity. Society's prevailing epistemologies tend to regard disability as a deficit, concentrating on the constraints of the body, disability's physical limitations, and functional impairments. Yet, the digital and cyborged spaces offer a counter-resistance where characters can build their systems of knowledge based on another time, ones that disavow normative conceptions of able-bodiedness. In this context, characters actively renegotiate their identity and produce alternative forms of knowledge that transcend traditional representations of medical and social perspectives on disability (Newitz, 2017; Venditti, 2005).

Cybernetic avatars in *The Surrogates* facilitate a world where disability can become invisible, and disability categories are reformed. Characters employ avatars to present themselves in a manner that transcends classic conceptions of the body. They can have experiences in life without the restricted encumbrances of their natural forms. These new avatars are generators of epistemic freedom: they are no longer subjected to features of the body; they are the embodiment of and for epistemic possibility, as they represent the avatar's epistemological possibility (Venditti, 2005).

Likewise, in *Autonomous*, Jack's biohacking works as epistemic resistance as well. By electing to alter her body on her terms, Jack is defying what she calls the medical model, one that tries to "fix" or "normalize" disability. Her interventions aren't about "erasing" her disability but about shifting the category of that disability, about transforming her body into something that more clearly mirrors her wishes and needs. In so doing, she is rejecting the prevailing epistemologies that construct disability as a deficiency and composing her knowledge grounded in experience, lived bodily, and self-determination (Newitz, 2017).

The virtual worlds in both novels create a space for challenging cultural expectations/status quos that want to remove or conceal disabilities. They provide characters with a space to rewrite the disability narratives and to participate in the production of alternatives to knowledge regarding disability. What these spaces do is to act as knowledge sanctuaries in which characters can refuse to affirm their epistemic bubbles and, in turn, construct a knowledge that is contingent upon their self-representation and their agency (Newitz, 2017; Venditti, 2005).

A related quote that addresses how digital or cybernetic bodies allow characters to fashion different kinds of self-knowledge or alternate identities can be found in *Autonomous* and *The Surrogates*. One critical example is *The Surrogates*, which strongly links the concept of a digital doppelganger to the elimination of disability: "In a world of surrogates, there is no such thing as disability" (Venditti, 2005).

This quote encapsulates the book's big idea, where everyone "meets" using digital avatars and where disability is no longer a disability. It's cancelled out by the supplanter body; that's like the ideal copy of the self. Though this enables space for empowerment, it also suggests that non-disability in the digital world may deny an individual the ability to be their lived embodiment.

In *Autonomous*, Jack's journey of transformation via biohacking provides another reframing of disability. She doesn't live in a digital avatar in the same way, but her physical updates allow her to overcome her body and assume a new identity that defies conventional ideas about what it means to be disabled. The decision to change her body and to affirm her disabled identity as something to be rearticulated as opposed to corrected is an act of epistemic resistance.

"We don't fix bodies; we let them become what they need to be" (Newitz, 2017, p. 142).

This quote is emblematic of Jack's philosophy on disability and self-awareness. By transforming her body, she renegotiates her identity and designs new ways of knowing herself that do not hinge on the constraints imposed by conventional notions of disability. In a way, Jack's path down the rabbit hole of biohacking is an exercise in agency and a challenge to society's version of normal.

(c). *Disability as a Source of New Agency*

In both *The Surrogates* and *Autonomous*, disability is reframed as an opportunity for new agency, rather than a barrier to be surpassed. It is in these stories' digital avatars and cybernetic bodies, and how characters use technology to circumvent the physical confines of disability and interact with the world around them in innovative ways, that the true potential of the genre emerges. No longer confined to the margins of society, in these digital worlds, people with disabilities can reclaim their bodies and recreate themselves in the image of who they would like to be, need to be, and want to be (Newitz, 2017; Venditti, 2005).

In these stories, disability isn't something to be cured or erased but an unlikely source of innovation and empowerment. Characters with disabilities can invent alternate bodies that change the way they interact with the world, unencumbered by the limitations their actual physical bodies may impose. In the process of self-fashioning, they provide a powerful challenge to ableism and to socially entrenched assumptions concerning the deficiencies of disability. Rather, they suggest, disability can serve as an epistemic site for creating knowledge and enabling people to remake themselves and the world they inhabit (Newitz, 2017; Venditti, 2005).

(d). *Digital Avatars and Cybernetic Bodies in The Surrogates and Autonomous*

In such digital worlds, characters can transcend the limits of their physical bodies and forge emancipatory new modes of self-knowledge outside the norms of able-bodiedness. In digital or cybernetic bodies, characters can reclaim their identities and, in the process, redefine their concept of disability as a force or tool that they hold and are in full control of (Newitz, 2017; Venditti, 2005).

In these stories, disability emerges as a site of resistance to prevailing social and medical constructions of what it means to be human. By refusing the fantasy body of able-bodiedness, the characters of these works open up new possibilities for how disabled people may interact with the world and imagine a more inclusive future. In this way, the online world provides a site where characters subvert the master narratives about disability and emerge as subjects in a different epistemology grounded in self-definition, truth-telling, and empowerment (Newitz, 2017; Venditti, 2005).

VI. CONCLUSION

In examining *Autonomous* by Annalee Newitz and *The Surrogates* by Robert Venditti, both texts argue that they portray disability as knowledge and thus resist normative medical and cultural ways of knowing disability as a lack. These works depict disability as a generator of power, of alternative knowledge, enabling us to imagine the digital or cyborg enhancement of humans as crossing physical humanity limits and changing the way we view disabilities (Newitz, 2017; Venditti, 2005).

In *Autonomous*, the hero Jack reconstructs her body through biohacking to control and reconfigure it, rather than to eliminate disability. Instead, she makes it an anchor of self-fulfillment and self-liberation. The novel challenges the medical view on disability, under which disabled bodies need to "be repaired" or "become normalized," creating a new epistemological location where disability is a platform for innovation and knowledge empowerment. In Jack's narrative, disability becomes an individual and political act, enabling her to craft her own identity and to negotiate her place in the world on her terms (Newitz, 2017).

The Surrogates presents a similar concept in which the surrogates are idealized avatars that allow people, diabetic and crippled, to interact with the world without the limits of their bodies. These avatars, on the one hand, empower individuals to live life as an ultra-perfect version of themselves but also make comments on the societal trend to delete disability in favor of a perfect digital form. In this universe, the disabled body is not celebrated but conquered by the idealized complement of machine-man (Venditti, 2005).

They both make the point that digital and cybernetic bodies are mechanisms for forming identity; they can convey new ways for the disabled to be in the world. These avatars and augmentations provide a way of reclaiming identity while choosing not to reconcile with the mainstream ableist narratives that generally frame disability as a “lack.” Instead, these technologies allow for the development of other forms of knowledge, in which disability becomes not the limit but a site of empowerment and agency (Newitz, 2017; Venditti, 2005).

A. Implications for Disability Studies

The depiction of disability in digital and cybernetic fiction, including *Autonomous* and *The Surrogates*, provides valuable sources of knowledge for imagining disability other than through an old medical or social model of disability. These works suggest that the focus on disability as something to be cured should be replaced with an understanding that disability is an inseparable part of embodied knowledge, which can open up ways of knowing and valuing the world. In framing disability as a site of empowerment, both texts push back against ableism that generally marginalizes disabled people from dominant stories and representations (Newitz, 2017; Venditti, 2005).

In the non-digital world, too, these stories can influence perceptions of disability. By providing characters with disabilities who communicate and interact with the world through cybernetic bodies or digital avatars, these stories encourage the idea that disability is not in itself a limitation but rather a valid basis for ingenuity. It can result in a more inclusive society in which disability is not viewed as a barrier to success or participation but rather is understood as a dimension of human diversity that adds to the diversity of living (Newitz, 2017; Venditti, 2005).

Within disability studies, such stories invite scholars and activists to think anew about representations of disability in digital media and popular culture. Instead, they point out the need to redefine disability as a non-static, changing, and ever-adapting knowledge that can open up new ways of knowing and learning (Newitz, 2017; Venditti, 2005).

B. Future Research Directions

This accumulation of digital disabilities and disability representations merits further investigation. Now, with emerging technology such as Virtual and Augmented Reality (VR/AR) and Artificial Intelligence (AI), there is an increasingly growing need for work that can contribute to understanding how they can better represent disability in a more empowering and inclusive way. Possible future studies could follow on:

Virtual Reality (VR) and Disability Representation: Exploring the potential use of VR in generating empathy and emotional connections with disabled users through exposing them to digital environments representative of their identity and experiences. This research might analyze the potential use of VR as a tool for self-empowering identity construction in much the same way that avatars and cyber bodies do in speculative summaries.

The Application of Augmented Reality and Accessibility: Exploring the usage of VR in everyday life and how disabled people benefit from this concept. It would be interesting to investigate how one could use AR to augment communication and mobility for people with disabilities, providing them new ways of experiencing the world in real time.

AI for Inclusion and Disability: Addressing how AI can be used to drive broader disability inclusion and foster greater accessibility for people with disabilities in several areas, such as work, home, and public. One area of investigation might explore how AI can be used to dismantle the impediments to social participation that people with disabilities commonly encounter by developing personalized means of communication, getting around, or interacting.

Digital Storytelling and Disability Identity: Future research might examine digital storytelling in games, cinema, and interactive media as a venue for the resituation (Gregor and Suigin) of disability and value the development of more realistic accounts of disabled lives. For example, research into networked media should consider how these types of media can disrupt stereotypes while portraying inclusive narratives that reflect disability as part of the human condition.

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