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(2018) by Sami Schalk

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BODYMINDS REIMAGINED: (DIS)ABILITY, RACE, AND GENDER IN BLACK WOMEN'S SPECULATIVE FICTION (2018) BY SAMI SCHALK

Review by Polly Atkin

Schalk, Sami. *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, race, and gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*. Duke University Press, 2018.

In the prologue and introduction to *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, race, and gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (2018) Sami Schalk explains how she came to the subject matter of this, her first monograph. She knew when she started her postgraduate studies that she wanted to focus on "representations at the intersection of black feminism and disability studies" (vii). It was only at others' suggestions that she added a third field of study – Speculative Fiction – and that it became the core of her doctoral research. *Bodyminds Reimagined* has grown out of that doctoral research.

In *Bodyminds Reimagined* Schalk makes a strong case for the unique ability of Speculative Fiction to produce: "representations of (dis)ability [...] not found elsewhere, representations that included race and gender politics and clear expressions of sexuality, representations that spoke to important realist political concerns whilst still being set in non-realist worlds" (145). Importantly, she ends the book with a reassertion of the importance of pleasure in reading, as, she argues, "pleasure is also political" (145). In making her case for the importance of black women's Speculative Fiction, she is not only making an intellectual case, but a deeply political and deeply emotional one.

Bodyminds Reimagined combines Schalk's original intention to research under-studied work by black women writers, with the equally under-studied intersections of Disability Studies and Speculative Fiction. In drawing together gender, race, and disability – areas which have been so underrepresented in critical studies – Schalk's work is genuinely original. It would have been original enough had she focused on realistic literature, which, as she notes, has generally been the mainstay of both Disability Studies and Black Writing. In turning her critical attention to Speculative Fiction, she has made a unique study. The four chapters are organised around thematic tropes and structural inequalities, in turn addressing disability in neo-slave narratives, able-mindedness in Science Fiction, how futuristic fiction might erase or include disabilities, and finally, how race, gender, sexuality, and disability have been defamiliarised in interspecies Fantasy fiction.

The first chapter, "Metaphor and Materiality: Disability and Neo-Slave Narratives" seeks to unpick how "the collusion of oppressions pays out in various historical and cultural moments"

arguing that “within the historical and cultural context of American slavery, ableism worked for racist ends against all black people, not merely the ones disabled in ways we would now consider disability” (34). In this first chapter, Schalk also explains why she takes a critical stance that might seem antithetical to some Disability scholars: that “disability can take on both metaphorical and material meaning in a text” (34). Disabled activists and critics often reject the attachment of disability to metaphor, but Schalk suggests that this elides black women’s experience and scholarship, claiming that “refusing to read disability as metaphor ignores the mutual constitution of (dis)ability, race, and gender as social categories and cultural discourses which have material effects on people’s lives” (34). Through her reading of Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred* (1979) she makes a compelling case “that neo-slave narratives allow for an understanding of the representation of disability as simultaneously material experience and as metaphor for other mutually constitutive and intersectional experiences of oppression, both in the past and today” (35). Schalk’s acknowledgement of that which is embodied can also have other meanings allows for a complex reading of disability in the texts, on both literal and metaphorical levels.

Schalk builds on her unpacking of *Kindred* to discuss Phyllis Alesia Perry’s novel *Stigmata* (1998), via the 2013 reboot of *The Tomorrow People*. In a second chapter titled “Whose Reality Is It Anyway? Deconstructing Able-Mindedness,” Schalk does a good job of toeing a line between the medical models and social models of disability, accepting that “for some people psychiatric labels and treatments are useful” and acknowledging “the realities of people with mental disabilities,” whilst also dissecting the social construction of mental illness (62). Through evidencing “how deviance from social norms, especially norms of race and gender, has historically been construed as mental disability” she demonstrates how “the line between able-mindedness and mental disability is not stable” (64, 65). This becomes particularly interesting in relation to *Stigmata*, and the other examples Schalk alludes to, reminding me also of Marge Piercy’s novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). In these narratives, rememory, multiple-selves, and time-travel embody the notion that “the experience and interpretation of reality by a racial, gender, sexual, or (dis)ability minority may dramatically differ from those in the majority” (*Bodyminds* 65). In attending to mental disability within *Stigmata*, Schalk recognises that the protagonists are not just oppressed by racism, but also ableism and sexism. In the conclusion to the chapter, she ties the lessons of the novel – that “experiences of reality are impacted by (dis)ability, race and gender and [...] how discourses of able-mindedness are used to discount disabled, racialized, gendered experiences of the world” – to contemporary politics, and to the murders of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner (79). This is a bold turn in a book of literary criticism, but the material demands it. As Schalk states: “ableism and the social construction of able-mindedness have been and continue to be used as weapons of racist violence” (82). Statements like these link the speculative worlds of the novels Schalk deconstructs in this book directly with our current realities, repeatedly reminding the reader that this is not just an intellectual exercise.

The third chapter, “The Future of Bodyminds, Bodyminds of the Future” brings this to bear on utopian and dystopian fictions, critiquing the tendency of utopias to erase disability. Schalk offers a reading of Butler’s *Parable* series (1993-1998) and its “non-realist disability” as presenting a future

that includes disability as par for the course; summed up in Alison Kafer's term a "crip vision of the future" (5, 102). Schalk turns to Butler's essays to draw her experience of disability together with her depictions of it in her fiction: "Butler's published and unpublished writings argue that technology guarantees neither a disability-free future nor any other supposedly desired outcomes" (107). Again, Schalk ties these theoretical futures to current, realworld consequences, arguing for the vital importance of positive representations of disability in futuristic writings:

As authors and activists imagine better futures, they create representations of that future – in worlds, in text, in images – which influence people to not merely hope for and believe in such futures, but work for them as well. They open up for us new ways of being in the world that may not yet exist, but could. (110)

This is a vital argument made by many disability activists and scholars but has yet to make much impact on mainstream cultural representations of the future. Ace Ratcliff's recent essay "Staircases in Space"(2018) documents the extent to which Science Fiction tropes remain caught in ableist paradigms, and why better representation such as that offered by Butler is so important.

The fourth chapter turns to Fantasy novels, and particularly interspecies Fantasy in the novels of N.K. Jemisin, Shawntelle Madison, and Nalo Hopkinson. In contrast to the non-realist disability in Butler's dystopia, these books represent "realist disabilities in non-realist contexts," which Schalk argues "push readers to understand disability from the perspectives of the main character, not from our preconceived notions and stereotypes" (119). The notion of time as non-linear appears here again. Like many of the narratives discussed, the arguments of the book loop back on themselves, returning to the same points with different characters, or different points with the same characters. Such looping neatly ties together what could be quite disparate chapters, and creates a sense of organic development to the book's theses.

This is an important book. I want to call it timely, but I am reminded of several essays I have read in the last year in which writers unpacked the use of 'timely' to describe their work about marginalisation and oppression, arguing 'timely' becomes shorthand for a kind of literary wokeness. That use of 'timely' erases the history of marginalisation, and of writing about marginalisation. The truth is that this study is not timely at all, but long overdue, and the failure of critical studies to take into account the intersecting factors Schalk attends to in her work is a sign of lingering pasts, not of present change. I am also reminded, of course, of the narratives analysed in the book, of the folding of time, of repeating experience, of the way the book reveals time-travel as a by-product of trauma, of oppression.

Underneath this excellent critical study is an autoethnography that traces how scholars and writers can positively influence each other's work. As with so many cases, it was a supervisor's reading recommendation that alerted Schalk to the particular role Speculative Fiction can play in

depicting disability, and in changing the narrative around disability. Professor LaMonda Horton-Stallings pointed Schalk towards Octavia E. Butler, and her depiction of 'non-realist disability,' but it was a chance conversation with Disability Studies scholar Professor Rosemarie Garland-Thomson that encouraged her to direct her focus solely on the possibilities of Speculative Fiction. In including these back-stories, and mentioning the "multiple intellectual, artistic and activist communities" that underpin her work, Schalk allows the reader to see this distinctive project as part of a much wider network of study and activism (viii). As Sara Ahmed has famously written, "citation is feminist memory" (*Living a Feminist Life* 15). Schalk makes sure to "acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow" (*Living a Feminist Life* 16).

In combining three areas of critical thinking, Schalk has a lot of theory to explain and unpack in order to do the deconstructive, and reconstructive work she needs to do, yet her writing remains clear and comprehensible at all times. Her explanations of terms are exemplary, and work both for those embedded in one or more of the critical areas, and for newcomers to the theories she is deploying. At times, the incredibly diligent signposting may feel a little overly explanatory: I began to find it a little repetitive in places. If it makes these important arguments comprehensible to a variety of readers, however, it seems worth it. I hope this will be the first of many studies to address this potent area, and that many other scholars will follow in Schalk's wake.

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BIONOTE

Polly Atkin lives in Grasmere, UK. Her doctorate on Romantic legacies and the Lake District was conducted in collaboration with The Wordsworth Trust and Lancaster University under the AHRC Landscape and Environment project. She has taught English and Creative Writing at Queen Mary University of London, Lancaster University, and the Universities of Strathclyde and Cumbria.

Her debut poetry collection *Basic Nest Architecture* (2017) is followed by a third pamphlet, *With Invisible Rain* (2018), which draws on Dorothy Wordsworth's late journals to articulate pain. She is a Penguin Random House *WriteNow* mentee for a nonfiction book on place, belonging, and chronic illness.