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Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction, by Sami Schalk

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BOOK REVIEW

Sami Schalk. *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*. Duke UP, 2018.

Bodyminds Reimagined is a compelling critical study of the points of contact and convergence between disability studies and Black feminist studies in contemporary Black women's speculative fiction. In the first monograph focusing exclusively on the representation of disability by Black authors, Schalk meticulously sketches the contours of the various fields with which *Bodyminds Reimagined* converses. Schalk begins with the stance that "(dis)ability is rarely accounted for in black feminist theory" and that disability studies "has often avoided issues of race" (3–4). Speculative fiction, Schalk argues, is a rich site to interrogate the contact between Black feminist theory and disability studies because the nonrealist genre elements allow authors to "reimagine the possibilities of bodyminds" (17) and posit alternative constructions of identity in nonreal worlds that in turn "force readers to question the ideologies undergirding these categories" (18). *Bodyminds Reimagined* considers Black women's speculative fiction published after 1970 using a three-pronged methodology: rejecting the good/bad binary that characterizes much scholarship on representations of disability; attending to more than just character analysis in close reading individual texts; and approaching speculative worlds on their own terms and reading them through their nonrealist rules. *Bodyminds Reimagined* is not only a vital examination of disability within Black fiction, but also a methodological manual of sorts for scholars inspired to continue this intellectual project.

But what is a "bodymind"? Schalk borrows this vocabulary from the materialist feminist disability scholarship by Margaret Price. This term resists the Cartesian dualism of mind versus body and insists instead on the "inextricability of mind and body" (5). Beyond serving as a theoretically useful term for investigating speculative fiction, which often reimagines the relationship between mind/body, Schalk contends that bodymind can also reveal how "non-physical experiences of oppression" (6) manifest in material ways. The entwined nature of the bodymind aligns with the project's theoretical foundations of intersectionality and crip theory. Schalk attends to recent critiques of intersectionality and its limitations, but advocates for its continued use when "untangling the mutual constitution of oppressions" (8). Additionally, crip theory departs from the rigid binary categorization of "disabled" and "non-disabled" and accounts for the flexibility, contingency, and mutability of social systems of identity.

Each chapter considers a specific instance of a bodymind reimagined in speculative fiction with detailed theoretical explications and close attention to textual examples. The first two chapters consider revisions of the past and the present in two neo-slave narratives: Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* (1979) and Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata* (1998). Together, these two chapters establish the need to understand disability in Black women's speculative fiction as both metaphor and materiality. Chapter one reveals the inadequacies of prior scholarship on Butler's *Kindred* that treats disability entirely as metaphor and not as a material experience of disability. To not attend to the protagonist Dana's amputated arm as a material reality disregards the historical conditions of American slavery and the experiences of and vulnerability to disability for enslaved people. Chapter two reiterates the necessity of reading disability as both metaphor and materiality within the narrower focus of able-mindedness in Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*. Through the social construction of normative mental capacities and abilities, able-mindedness defines the limits of real and unreal. By taking literally the differing reality of protagonist Lizzie who experiences the multiple consciousnesses of her deceased

relatives, *Stigmata* critiques the “ableism, racism, and sexism” imbedded in able-mindedness, “especially within the psychiatric medical-industrial complex” (62). While chapter two intends to build on the conclusions of the prior chapter, the more specific focus ultimately results in a less cogent argument. The chapter conclusion brings the analysis of *Stigmata* to bear on contemporary examples of police violence against Black people, but the links are not immediately clear. The conclusion aims to argue that police brutality creates and enforces boundaries of able-mindedness and that the highly publicized deaths of Eric Garner or Philando Castile, for example, become “traumatic memories” that “impact how contemporary black Americans experience reality” (81). The analysis positions *Stigmata* and police violence as two examples of the punitive consequences of able-mindedness without demonstrating precisely how the former provides necessary frameworks or methods for understanding the latter.

The second half of *Bodyminds Reimagined* turns toward speculative fictions of the future and the implications of and for disability in imagining a future world. Generally, speculative fiction tends to erase disability as a feature of the future or it displaces categories of difference onto nonhuman creatures and characters. Chapter three returns to Octavia Butler, this time analyzing her *Parable* series (1993–1998) as actively resisting the notion of a “technologically created, disability-free future” (87, 102) through the representation of hyperempathy, which Schalk contends is a disability in the worldview of the series. Butler’s dystopic future includes disability without condemning disability as the catalyst for social collapse. Rather, Schalk shows that hyperempathy, a nonrealist disability, can be both “useful and desirable” (111). The last chapter shifts from the previous three chapters in two significant ways. First, it examines three primary texts instead of one—N.K. Jemisin’s *The Broken Kingdoms* (2010), Shawntelle Madison’s *Coveted* series (2012–2014), and Nalo Hopkinson’s *Sister Mine* (2013). Second, while the first three chapters analyze nonrealist disabilities in realist settings, chapter four considers realist disabilities—blindness, OCD, and conjoined twins, respectively—as experienced by nonhuman characters in nonrealist worlds. Bringing realist disabilities to bear on nonhuman characters destabilizes the definition of human and additionally questions what it means to be “recognizably disabled, black, woman, and so on” (116).

The deft theoretical interventions and the inclusion of both canonized and noncanonized primary texts in *Bodyminds Reimagined* will appeal to scholars of disability, race, gender, literature, American studies, and cultural studies. Furthermore, it will also appeal to those who find pleasure in reading speculative fiction. Schalk concludes with a call for the importance of pleasure in the reading and representation of these works of fiction. Unexpectedly, Schalk’s text also elicits a similar type pleasure in its reading; it is simultaneously accessible and complex, exhaustively sourced and fresh in its analysis. While Schalk opens the field to engage more robustly with understudied texts such as those by Phyliss Alesia Perry, N.K. Jemisin, Shawntelle Madison, and Nalo Hopkinson, the poignancy of her intervention sharpens in the discussions of Octavia Butler. In fact, Butler appears in all the chapters—as the epigraph for chapter two and evoked as a “literary legend” in chapter four (135). All critics interested in Butler’s opus—not only *Kindred* and the *Parable* series—will find productive dialogues with these readings. The convergence of disability studies and Black feminist studies found in *Bodyminds Reimagined* is long overdue and students, scholars, and fans of speculative fiction will be well served to familiarize themselves with this book.

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