

## Books in Review

Sami Schalk

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

Duke University Press, 2018, pb, 192 pp, \$24.95

ISBN: 978-0-8223-7183-0

Reviewed by: Michael Bérubé

Sami Schalk describes *Bodyminds Reimagined* as a “loving, critical intervention into black feminist theory and disability studies” (3). That alone would make it an indispensable book. It is, among other things, a timely corrective to the overinvestment in realist modes of representation in both disability studies and the early history of African American literature; to readers who might wonder why marginalized people might spend their time reading (or writing) speculative fiction instead of addressing brutal inequalities in the here and now, Schalk responds, “the freedom afforded speculative fiction authors through the rejection of verisimilitude, the use of nonmimetic devices, the disruption of linear time, and other tropes which subvert our expectations of reality are all beneficial to writers who wish to represent a world not restricted by our contemporary racist, sexist, ableist, homophobic, and classist realities” (22).

It's really impossible to overstate the importance of this corrective, particularly for disability studies. African American literary production was devoted to realist modes of representation for obvious reasons, from slave narratives to the “protest novel,” but began to get emphatically weird and experimental with the arrival of writers like Toni Morrison and Ishmael Reed in the late 1960s—at which point readers could go back and reassess Zora Neale Hurston's incorporation of folklore and/or realize that W. E. B. DuBois (“The Comet”) and George Schuyler (*Black No More*) were, in fact, writing speculative fiction. But scholars in disability studies for many years devoted their attention almost exclusively to the question of whether literary depictions of disability were accurate or adequate representations of the lived experiences of people

with disabilities.

Schalk not only makes a decisive argument for the importance of reading speculative fiction and non-realistic representations of disability; she also deftly navigates the tension between reading disability as metaphor and as material reality. To take examples from Octavia Butler's work, about which Schalk's readings are nothing short of brilliant: in the *Earthseed* duology, Lauren Olamina's hyperempathy is neither a disease nor a superpower, and Schalk weaves her way through dozens of misreadings on that score. In *Kindred*, critics have been tempted—and have not resisted the temptation—to read Dana Franklin's disablement as a metaphor for the legacy of slavery, whereas Schalk understands that “disability in the text is at once a metaphor for racial oppression and a reference to or reflection of the material prevalence of disability for black people during the antebellum period” (56). Is disability a material fact for bodyminds represented in the text? Or is it a metaphor for something else? Schalk's response is exactly right: No, not either/or, both/and. Moreover, Schalk reads disability in *Kindred* in terms of its relation to the novel's narrative devices: “time travel in *Kindred* is structured by disability in multiple ways: Dana's moves through time are impelled by the threat of disability, the involuntary experience of these moves is disabling, and her place as a black woman in the antebellum past puts her at additional risk for disablement” (53).

*Bodyminds Reimagined* has more virtues than I can enumerate or explain in this short space, but I will close with two teasers. One has to do with Shawn-telle Madion's *Coveted* series, whose main character Natalya, is a werewolf with OCD. That is entice-

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-ment enough to think about inter- and intraspecies difference (in a speculative mode), but Schalk cannily notes that Natalya's medication is only a mitigation, and that her disability "nonetheless marks her as a nonnormative, low-ranking werewolf" (123). The other has to do with Schalk's reading of Phyllis Alesia Perry's novel *Stigmata* (which, I confess, I have not read). In *Kindred*, Dana decides not to tell police that she is being whisked back to antebellum Maryland because she knows she will be carted off to a psychiatric hospital if she does. In *Stigmata*, the main character, Lizzie, bears out that fear: psychologically and physically inhabited by her slave ancestors, her resulting scars are interpreted by her parents and doctors as evidence of self-harm. She is institutionalized for fourteen years, and, as Schalk notes, "Lizzie's experience of a psychiatric institution provides an additional metaphor for the dismissal of historical knowledge and the afterlife of oppression as well as a direct material critique of the social construction of able-mindedness and the ableist, racist, and sexist practices of the psychiatric medical-industrial complex" (68).

Schalk closes that chapter with a haunting meditation on police violence against people of color, particularly people of color with psychosocial disabilities—and/or people of color who are deemed to have psychosocial disabilities because they are, remarkably enough, angry about things like systemic racial oppression. And she closes the book by testifying to her abiding fear of that violence, "making it a daily practice to finish my work time by standing in my hallway and reading aloud the print I have of the Lucille Clifton poem" that ends with the lines "come celebrate / with me that everyday / something has tried to kill me / and has failed" (Clifton 25, Schalk 144). At its greatest reach, *Bodyminds Reimagined* is not only a timely intervention into black feminist theory and disability studies. It is a powerful reminder that black lives matter, even in speculative fiction and its overdetermined relations to what we still call the "real" world, and that the conjunction of black feminist theory and disability studies is a crossroads at which human lives hang in the balance.