



REVIEW

Imagining Otherwise: The Importance of Speculative Fiction to New Social Justice Imaginaries

Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction, by Sami Schalk (Duke University Press, 2018)

and

Migrant Futures: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times, by Aimee Bahng (Duke University Press, 2017)

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Sami Schalk begins her new book *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (2018) with a confession. She admits that she was not always a fan of speculative fiction due to the “geeky male whiteness of the genre” (p. 1). And while

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speculative fiction continues to be predominantly white and male, Schalk shows us how diversification of the medium is, in fact, happening. She also helps us as readers understand, through speculative fiction, the various intersectional oppressions that (dis)abled women of color (and others) navigate in their non-speculative, everyday lived experience. Schalk begins by examining Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred* (1979). According to Schalk, *Kindred* illustrates that disability is not merely a metaphor for Blackness or slavery, but must also be taken as the literal, embodied reality of enslaved people. In the opening of *Kindred*, we learn that the protagonist has lost her arm in mysterious circumstances. The specter of eventual disability forces the reader to “anticipate and expect that disablement could occur at any moment in the text, an experience that psychologically gestures toward the vulnerability of slaves to disability at any moment as well” (p. 50). The ways in which disability affects slaves' productivity in the slave economy becomes a literal and metaphorical mirror for how disability affects us all in our own society.

Schalk returns to Butler's work in Chapter 3, examining the *Earthseed* series (*Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998)). The *Earthseed* series, Schalk suggests, illustrates how disability cannot be understood as either a purely negative experience, nor as merely a gateway to superpowers. While scholarly discussion of the *Earthseed* series has landed in both of those camps, Schalk insists that Butler's work itself does not. The parallels between how scholars have treated the *Earthseed* series and how scholars, and the public, tend to treat disability here in the real world are the explicit target of Schalk's critiques in this chapter.

Through the lens of Phyllis Alessia Perry's (1998) novel *Stigmata*, Schalk illustrates how race, gender, and disability conflate to produce certain types of mental illness and (dis)ability (while acknowledging the inseparability of disabilities of the mind and body, represented by her use of the term “bodymind”), and how the psychiatric-pharmaceutical industry

works to reinforce and control that production. By evoking the ways in which people have been deemed mentally unfit, disabled, or feebleminded throughout history, particularly in the eugenic era in the first half of the twentieth century, *Stigmata* illustrates the particularly racialized and gendered ways in which we as a society see mental disability.

In her penultimate chapter, Schalk makes a subtle but significant shift in how she describes the defamiliarizing work of speculative fiction. Here, Schalk takes on realist (dis)abilities (such as blindness or obsessive compulsive disorder) in non-realist settings or with non-human bodyminds. In doing so, Schalk illustrates how (dis)abilities that we think we know and understand can be complicated by changing the contexts in which those (dis)abilities function on an individual and cultural level. The blind character, Oree, from N.K Jemisin's *The Broken Kingdoms* (2010), who can "see" magic due to her demon heritage, is disabled in non-magical places but functionally non-disabled in magic-rich settings (pp. 119-120). Oree's dual status challenges the notion of the (dis)abled as un-able in all contexts, but also avoids the notion of the "supercrip," both tropes that are often deployed in both speculative and realist settings.

Throughout *Bodyminds Reimagined*, Schalk continues to show us that it is possible to imagine ourselves differently. It is incumbent upon us as readers, citizens, and authors to do so more often, in more ways, and including more kinds of people. Only through different imaginings will the world's oppressive structures shift. *Bodyminds Reimagined* is an important work on theorizing speculative fiction and the ways in which it can change perceptions, actions, and minds. A model for future intersectional scholarship, this book is well written and accessible.

In her 2018 *Migrant Futures: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times*, Aimee Bahng also uses speculative fiction to disrupt expectations. Bahng notes how pervasive financial speculation has become in our society, and how risk and return, capital and colonialism, have been used on and against migrant and diasporic populations. Bahng uses speculative

fiction by people of color, particularly Asian Americans, to show us different ways to imagine and bring forth alternative, and perhaps more just, futures. Bahng centers each chapter around a theme or location, draws out some standard narratives, which she then complicates through several examples of speculative fiction.

This book is significantly less accessible than Schalk's. The connections between real-life examples and speculative fiction reimaginings/queerings are less obvious, the relevance of finance in particular seems to wax and wane throughout the book. The writing is sometimes weighed down by jargon and the difficulties of wrangling a multitude of ephemerally-connected threads into a coherent whole. The introductory chapter does not provide a useful overview of the structure of the book. Gradually, however, it becomes clear that this omission is intentional, as I realized once I was a few chapters into the book, into the cases and comparisons. Only then did I begin to understand what Bahng was doing.

The ideas in this book are big, novel, and fantastic. But more than that, the structure itself is an act of academic decolonization and speculation. Perhaps it was merely my own failure, based on my expectations of scholarly work, that I had trouble in the beginning. As I continued, I began to realize that this book does not just illustrate how speculative fiction can disrupt our Western linear, capitalist, colonialist expectations. Just as Karen Tei Yamashita (author of *Tropic of Orange*, [2017]), in Bahng's words, "puns on the narrative 'plot' lines that follow unidirectional, linear trajectories to suggest progress and development" (p. 66), Bahng herself disrupts this same expectation. Bahng does, in this scholarly work, to scholarly work what she describes speculative fiction doing to speculative finance, capitalism, and various colonialisms, including neo- and post-. It is a profound experiment in narrative scholarship, and a bit of clunkiness is probably expected.

Because of the complexities of her arguments, I will focus on one chapter as illustrative of the book. In chapter 3, "Speculation and the Speculum," Bahng delves into reproduction, and particularly the notion of surrogacy, as a racialized and colonialist practice. She begins by comparing a pair of real-life stories: the 2008 *New York Times Magazine* story about (and authored by) Alex Kuczynski, titled "Her Body, My Baby: My Adventures with a Surrogate Mom," and the discourse that article inspired; and the story of Nadya Suleman, commonly referred to as "Octomom," and the ways in which the discourse around her story changed over time. Bahng puts these real-life stories in conversation with Alfonso Cuarón's 2006 film *Children of Men*, and Nalo Hopkinson's 2000 novel *Midnight Robber*.

Kuczynski's tale is rife with markers of class and the colonial offloading of labor onto women of color, particularly migrants. The photos in Kuczynski's own story show her, a white woman, holding a blue-eyed white baby, while their nanny, a woman of color, looks on. Kuczynski also talks about being able to go on a few last-minute trips (white-water rafting, skiing, drinking bourbon, and going to the Super Bowl [p. 79]) before her surrogate finally delivered. These circumstances, detailed in Kuczynski's own writing, illustrate the ways in which finance allows one the benefits of motherhood while avoiding the labor/responsibility.¹ This is the case both in gestating the child, which was done by her surrogate, and in caring for him as well, which will be done in large part by a nanny. This allocation of labor allows Kuczynski the privilege of maintaining the globetrotting life to which she has grown accustomed. Alternatively, Suleman's story began as a tale of scientific wonder of in vitro fertilization, but as her financial situation became more widely known, racial, class, and immigrant narratives took over in popular discourse. Suleman became the poster child for the racialized "welfare queen," leeching off the system, producing more offspring than she could possibly care for on her own—a distinct no-no in our neoliberal capitalist system.

Bahng then contrasts Suleman, Kuczynski, and *Children of Men* with Hopkinson's novel *Midnight Robber*, which queers futurity, both the teleological discourses around technological progress, and the oppressive structures that are upheld by Western, white technological and social norms. Hopkinson, Bahng argues, queers these narratives through “cross-species partnering and queer family formation...[and] migrant communities...dislodged from heteronormative domesticity” (pp. 82-83). And through these queerings, Hopkinson disentangles technology from the Western cultural codes of progress, freedom, and modernity (p. 83), instead valorizing migrancy and social coalitions that are situated in new, local, and contingent ways.

Both Schalk's *Bodyminds Reimagined* and Bahng's *Migrant Futures* are fascinating, important, and exciting. I recommend these books for any scholars who want to use race, gender, (dis)ability, or migrant issues in their work, and especially for those who are interested in how fictional imaginaries might be used to investigate real-world issues. I am super excited to see where these two scholars go next.

Notes

¹ The relative lack of Kuczynski's husband in both the story and its treatment by Bahng is somewhat notable in that it seems to re-inscribe the heteronormative notion that mothering is a set of labors that are done by women. That reproductive labor is discussed in this book only as a racialized and colonial project, and not in gender terms is a fairly glaring omission, one that could have been easily dealt with in a single paragraph or note.

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Bio

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