JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2019

Sponsored by the
Museum of Science Fiction
Washington, DC

MOSF Journal of Science Fiction
Volume 3, Number 2
31 July 2019
ISSN 2474-0837

Cover Art:
"Wheel Whirl": Olivia Wise

Reflections:

Articles:

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2019
ISSN 2472-0837

Articles (cont.):

Book Reviews:

Additional Artwork:

Sponsored by the Museum of Science Fiction
& hosted by the University of Maryland Libraries.

Museum of Science Fiction
PO Box 88
Alexandria, VA 22313

University of Maryland Libraries
7649 Library Lane
College Park, MD 20742

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2019
ISSN 2472-0837

Open Access Policy

This journal provides immediate open access to its content in keeping with the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge.

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2019
ISSN 2472-0837

Table of Contents

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2019
ISSN 2472-0837

Table of Contents (cont...)

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2019
ISSN 2472-0837

Cover Art

Cover Art: Wheel Whirl by Olivia Wise

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2019
ISSN 2472-0837

Letter from the Editor

As the Managing Editor of the *Journal of Science Fiction*, I have had the immense pleasure of watching our publication grow and evolve to include increasingly rigorous and thought-provoking scholarship about works of science and speculative fiction. Ever since the successful release of our first special issue on Afrofuturism last year (February 2018), the *Journal* has sought to address questions of intersectional identity, minority consciousness, genre, and the interplay between individual rights and state power, dedicating one issue per annum to the exploration of such topics of interest. In that vein, the disability special issue before you foregrounds the lived experiences of people with disabilities and offers ample opportunity for reflection and discussion surrounding disability representation, inclusion, and accessibility.

The pieces collected here were submitted from all around the world with scholars examining works of Italian and Chinese SF in addition to an array of British and American works. The global discussion about disability in SF clearly offers an avenue for exploring the potential that coalitional engagement and interdependence amongst the disabled have to change the material realities of social existence, and connect individuals across cultural boundaries, geographical restrictions, and physical or mental limitations.

But perhaps most importantly, as a genre dedicated to imagining possible futures—replete with all the standard explorations of technology, biopolitics, environmental destruction, and encounters with the alien other that they entail—science fiction is uniquely capable of materializing visions of a brighter tomorrow that includes and normativizes the existence of every conceivable type of body, attesting to the value of the perspectives gained from promoting and revisiting difference, and testifying to the inherent worth of disabled lives.

As proponents of the social model of disability, which contends that disability arises from society's unwillingness to make public life accessible to people with a variety of bodies and impairments, the *Journal of Science Fiction* editorial staff has been particularly invested in publishing scholarship that places the social model into conversation with issues as wide spread as identity and normativity to the commodifying, disciplinary gaze and the origins of disability stigma, including the heyday of early American freak shows, and beyond. In this issue, you will encounter meditations on physical and mental disabilities, visible and invisible impairments, and the role that we assign to ethics in sustaining and advocating for a positive culture surrounding disability. You'll read reflections from some of the foremost scholars currently researching at the intersection of science fiction and disability studies. You'll also discover novel readings of texts and films both familiar and unfamiliar, and engage with thought-provoking scholarship about meaning, identity, embodiment, and more.

Given the breadth of voices present in this issue, encapsulating the coalitional engagement between professional scholars (both affiliated and independent), graduate students, artists, and readers, I direct you towards the insightful "Foreword" contributed by Dr. Sami Schalk and a measured contemplation of current disability studies offered by Dr. Michael Bérubé. I am particularly indebted to Sami and Michael, as well as Dr. Melinda C. Hall (who also contributed a reflection featured here), for their ongoing engagement with the Museum of Science Fiction's exploration of disability—from our panel on neurodiversity at Escape Velocity 2019 to the anticipated success of this special issue—and for the strength of their voices and depth of their reflections. And as always, such an endeavor would not be possible if not for the dedication of our editorial staff.

As you contemplate alternate bodyminds (Schlak) throughout this special issue, we hope that each of you will be personally and professionally inspired to pay more attention to disability literature, representation, advocacy, and lived experience, especially through a science fictional lens. As a genre fundamentally invested in exploring the future, science fiction will continue to push the boundaries of normativity to promote and ultimately, assure, a future in which

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2019
ISSN 2472-0837

Letter from the Editor, continued

everyone has a right to exist—so long as we nourish and prioritize the primacy of such discourses. We hope that the scholarly contributions included here foreground the visibility and importance of our commitment to disability.

- Aisha Matthews Walker
Managing Editor, MOSF *Journal of Science Fiction*

\

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2019
ISSN 2472-0837

Foreword to the Special Issue on Disability Studies

Bodyminds, Science Fiction, and Disability Studies

By **Sami Schalk**

Science fiction is fundamentally about imagining alternatives for human and non-human bodyminds,[1] about what these beings could do, could be, someday—for better or for worse. No matter how much a text is about spaceships, time travel machines, or other forms of futuristic technology, it is also about the bodyminds, the people, who imagine, create, use, experience, and potentially abuse these technologies. When we use science fiction to consider who is and is not human or sentient, to explore what aspects of humanity we want to save or dispose of, to question the norms and practices of our society by comparing it to a literally alien one, we are engaging questions of (dis)ability.

(Dis)ability is a term I use to refer to the historically and culturally specific social system of mental, physical, and behavioral norms which determine who is considered disabled and nondisabled and how we treat those whose bodyminds fall outside of the norm. Of course, disabled and nondisabled are just the terms we currently use to describe these categories of normative and non-normative bodyminds; these terms could change in the future as could our understanding of what constitutes ability and disability; indeed they already have. Current medical and bodymind technologies, from insulin to laser eye surgery, from psychiatric medications to high-tech prosthetics, have already changed the way we understand certain bodymind differences as disabling or not. Indeed, issues of (dis)ability are at the heart of what much science fiction explores and as I argue in my book, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)abiliy, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction,* "Disability studies can provide speculative fiction critics additional language and frameworks to discuss the multiple ways in which texts challenge normative assumptions about the possibilities and meanings of bodyminds" (Schalk 22).

This special issue of *Journal of Science Fiction* is an important moment for the inclusion of disability studies in science fiction studies and for the increased, serious engagement with science fiction in disability studies. It is part of a growing body of work which helps us understand how this nonrealist genre comments upon and offers new ways of thinking about (dis)ability as a social system.[2] Further, as more openly disabled writers produce their own works of science fiction, we are witnessing a particularly exciting moment for disability in science fiction production, as well as criticism. This special issue provides essential critical perspectives and frameworks for understanding these science fictional representations of disability and ability in old and new texts alike, from Philip K. Dick's *Clans of the Alphane Moon* and Isaac Asimov's *Robot* series to Ian McEwan's *Saturday* and contemporary Chinese and Italian science fictions. The range of the topics within, including illness, scarring as a coalitional tool, neurodiversity, and anti-psychiatry, to name a few, similarly demonstrates both what is possible and how much more work there is to do on (dis)ability in science fiction. The work here is fresh and essential to the science fiction studies as our world continues to change and the fiction produced within it changes as well.

Notes

[1] I use the term bodyminds to "refer to the enmeshment of the mind and body, which are typically understood as interacting and connected, yet distinct entities… The term bodymind insists on the inextricability of mind and body and highlights how processes within our being impact one another in such a way that the notion of a physical versus mental process is difficult, if not impossible to clearly discern in most cases" (Schalk 8). Schalk, S (2018). B*odyminds reimagined: (Dis)ability, race, and gender in black women's speculative fiction.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

[2] See, for example, Allan, K (2013). *Disability in science fiction: Representations of technology as cure.* Palgrave Macmillan; Vanderhooft, J. (ed.). (2013). *Shattering ableist narratives.* Aqueduct Press.

Bodyminds, Science Fiction, and Disability Studies, continued

References

Allan, K (2013). *Disability in science fiction: Representations of technology as cure.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Schalk, S (2018). *Bodyminds reimagined: (Dis)ability, race, and gender in black women's speculative fiction.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Vanderhooft, J. (ed.) (2013.) *Shattering ableist narratives.* Aqueduct Press.

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2019
ISSN 2472-0837

Reflections

Other Bodyminds are Possible

By: Michael Bérubé

It took me a long time to come back to science fiction. Like Sami Schalk, I am a late arrival—except that where she can open her book by saying, "Confession: I was not initially a fan of speculative fiction" (1), I have to confess that forty-five years ago I was a white teenage boy, and read the stuff voraciously for a few years. My favorite writers were Ray Bradbury and Harlan Ellison; I was deeply obsessed with both the book and the film *2001: A Space Odyssey,* so much so that when *Star Wars* was released, I thought it was a giant step backward for the genre. I was fifteen, so I should have been in its target demographic. But I just couldn't deal with giant spaceships blowing up and catching fire and falling down…in space.

When the Paul Verhoeven film *Total Recall* reminded me that "mutants" are meditations on variant bodyminds—a point that has since been made emphatically by the X-Men movies (and of course was always there in the X-Men world), I began to revisit the genre more seriously.[1] In 2004, after I had given a talk on disability and science fiction, an audience member asked me if I had read C. S. Friedman's *This Alien Shore* (1998). I had not; and the exchange reminded me that up to that point, I had never taught a course in science fiction largely because I did not have enough confidence to walk into a classroom where many of the students would know more than I did. Now, in my fifties, I don't really care. No, that's not quite true: I relish those moments. Those are the moments in which I learn something.

*

Like, for example, the existence of C. S. Friedman's *This Alien Shore*. I reread it for this occasion, and I'm happy to report that fifteen years after my first reading, it is even better than I remembered. It's a cyberpunk thriller with a good deal of political intrigue, but the really brilliant thing about it is its treatment of intellectual disability and intraspecies diversity. Humans develop the technical means for achieving hyperlight speed (the Hausman Drive) and interstellar travel, and begin to colonize distant Earthlike planets. So far, standard science fiction fare. But the effects of superluminal travel produce significant genetic mutations in the colonists (the Hausman Variants); horrified by all these radical forms of intra-species Otherness, Earth cuts off all commerce with the colonies, even the ones that are barely subsisting and simply need supplies—which could of course have been delivered by spacecraft without human crews. The mutant colonists who survive, as you might imagine, develop a profound distrust and hatred of the blinkered, mutant-phobic Terrans.

Many hundreds of years later, one of the mutant colonies, on the settlement Guera, finds that they have the ability to navigate interstellar travel—not via the Hausman Drive but by the discovery of a system of fault lines in the universe, the ainniq. But there is a catch: the ainniq is filled with terrors, and only the Guerans are capable of piloting ships through it. Everyone else needs to be rendered unconscious if they are to survive the journey. The reason the Guerans can do this? They are mutants with what appears to be autism. They are mutants with what appears to be Tourette's. They are mutants with what appears to be OCD. (They are also neo-Asian, and I can't decide whether this is orientalist…or the opposite of orientalism, whatever that might be. This is the novel's only treatment of race as we now know it, in characters with names like Kio Masada and Chandras Delhi.) Of all the Hausman Variants, the Guerans are the only ones who physically resemble us Terrans. But they have all the forms of neurodiversity that Terrans foolishly believed they had managed to eradicate from the species. And now the Guerans control the galaxy; still they are merciful toward the benighted Terrans who tried to consign the colonies to eternal isolation, even welcoming them into the new galactic order made possible by travel through the ainniq.

The plot involves two threats to the Geurans' benign but ironclad monopoly over interstellar travel

and commerce: a diabolical virus designed to attack their pilots, and an experiment by an Earth corporation to modify a young woman's brain so as to induce a form of schizophrenia or multiple personality disorder which will mimic the neurodiversity that allows the Guerans to navigate the ainniq. But I'll offer no spoilers here. I'll say only that *This Alien Shore* can be read profitably alongside Rivers Solomon's neuroqueer *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (2018) as examples of speculative fiction that imagine forms of neurodiversity as—well, not as superpowers, as in the world of the X-Men, but as valuable talents that contribute much to the social fabric of human life. Though the novels could not be more different in their treatment of intraspecies diversity: in *An Unkindness of Ghosts*, the main character, Aster, a neuroqueer woman of color, resides at the bottom of a rigid social hierarchy aboard a massive spacecraft of would-be colonists fleeing an uninhabitable Earth, and in *This Alien Shore* the neurodiverse Guerans are the agents assiduously stitching together the social fabric of galactic human life. In all its Hausman Variations.

*

In 2018, Aisha Matthews graciously invited me to be part of a panel on neurodiversity and science fiction at Escape Velocity, but unfortunately my schedule did not permit me to accept the invitation. In 2019, she even more graciously reinvited me, and this time my co-panelists would be Sami Schalk and Melinda C. Hall—which is why we're all in this issue together. Escape Velocity was easily one of the coolest conferences I have attended in my thirty years in this business, and being on that panel was a rare pleasure. (Professor Schalk's and Professor Hall's essays here will give you some idea why). Ms. Matthews had cannily suggested that we all read each other's work before convening together with *An Unkindness of Ghosts*; Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower, Parable of the Talents*, and *Patternmaster;* Laura Tisdale's *Echoes;* and *Octavia's Brood*, the remarkable collection of short stories edited by adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha. The idea—that is, Ms. Matthews' idea—was that we would talk extemporaneously about these texts and whatever others came to mind, rather than read academic papers in an academic manner. ("Wow," I thought upon getting that reading list in my email, "this is way more work than writing an eight-page paper. And way more fun.")

I had read Professor Schalk's *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)Ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* almost as soon as it came off the presses, not only because I knew I would learn much from it, but because I imagined that even though my own *The Secret Life of Stories* merely gestures at the work of Octavia Butler and offers no analyses of works by black women writers, we had something else in common: the desire to persuade our colleagues in disability studies that they need not confine themselves to "realistic" representations of disability in fiction, and (more radically) need not confine themselves to "representations" of disability at all.

I made my argument in whispers, suggesting tentatively that I prefer Philip K. Dick's representation of autism in *Martian Time-Slip* (1964) to Mark Haddon's in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) because no one could reasonably object that Dick's novel was an inaccurate portrayal of a person with autism. It's hard to imagine a reader saying, "*See here, that's not right, an autistic ten-year-old (on Mars) can't* possibly *see decades into the future and warp other people's sense of space and time*." I wanted to persuade critics not to read literary texts by reference to the DSM-5, but rather to see how manifestations of and even ideas about intellectual disability are rendered as textual effects. (In other words, I don't care if Christopher Boone, the narrator of *Curious Incident*, has Asperger's, though I know that he pisses off plenty of people with and without Asperger's. I care about the texts-within-the-texts, starting with the title, that render intellectual disability as a distinctive form of relation to texts.) Professor Schalk, by contrast, blows the doors wide open in her introduction, writing that "the focus on realism as the proper or pref-

-erred avenue for politically effective literature for marginalized groups like black women and disabled people overlooks the immense possibilities of speculative fiction as well as the limits of realism" (20). My copy of *Bodyminds Reimagined* has this note in the margin of this passage: "O Yes."

I suspect, dear reader, that you would not be here if you were not of the "O Yes" party as well. And if I am right about that, I'd like to ask you to reflect not only on the richness of the essays before you here, but upon the fact that the genre of science fiction has been exploring forms of neurodiversity for decades. One wonders why it took so long for literary critics to catch on—except that, well, it took me a long time to come back to science fiction, and I know, we know, that much of the literary and lit crit world will never take the genre seriously. That world, like the mutant-phobic Earth of *This Alien Shore*, is so much the poorer and more isolated for that. But as Ms. Matthews told me, the 2018 discussion of disability and science fiction at Escape Velocity proved to be so provocative and generative that they just had to do it again the following year (and so much the better for me!). I don't traffic in predictions—or speculative fictions—but I will hazard a guess that the neurodiverse genie is not going back in that bottle. Thanks to Ms. Matthews and to the essayists here, including my awesome copanelists, the topic of neurodiversity in science fiction now looks like a permanent agenda item for criticism. Other bodyminds are possible. And this genre may prove to the best venue to pursue the lines of thought and the lines of flight (through the ainniq!) to which that injunction invites us.

Notes

[1] And can I just say how much I loved *Deadpool 2*, not only for its humor and the narrative self-reflexivity but for its representation of the history of institutionalization and "cure" of people with developmental disabilities?

References

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

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2019
ISSN 2472-0837

Reflections

What Future People Will There Be? Neurodiverse Heroes for a Changing Planet

By: Melinda Hall

In this essay, I juxtapose two sites of the construction of disability. The first site is the interdisciplinary academic field of bioethics. The second site is science fiction. Both speculate about the future. But, literature produced at one site speculates poorly in ways that reproduce and retrench current stigma, while literature produced at the other site speculates in a more valuable way, creatively and thoughtfully engaging novel possibilities. One might assume that the literature I call valuable is produced under the banner of bioethics, structured by esteemed institutions and spearheaded by vaunted, internationally known scholars. It is not. I believe that science fiction increasingly speculates in a more valuable way. Here, I will say why and juxtapose the two literatures to illustrate the contingency of neurodiversity.

Disability is produced through complex power relations. By that I mean that what counts as disability, and how it is intertwined with a person's lifestyle, body, prospects, and experiences, is historically conditioned and discursively constructed. Disability is, therefore, deeply contingent. (For a book-length treatment of this from a feminist, philosophical perspective, see Tremain 2017). Because it is social and political, medical and biological renderings of disability are not exhaustive and, indeed, these renderings are themselves vectors of the power relationships that one needs to investigate in order to understand what disability is. Merely medical understandings of disability are reductive and significantly misunderstand disability, reframing it in harmful ways. This does not mean that disability lacks material reality. It does mean, however, that significant analytical effort is required to understand how the material reality of disability is shaped and, in turn, shapes encounters among living beings and the environment. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson employs the term disability/ability system to refer to the complex system of power that classifies bodies as either abled or disabled (2002, 6). While this system inscribes disability, and—as Shelley Tremain argues—impairment, as natural, an urgent task of critical disability theory is to thoroughly denaturalize disability (2001). The project of critical disability theory involves, minimally, contextualizing disability and showcasing the ways it is variously produced. Maximally, it continuously reframes disability to avoid biological reductions, rework power relations, and refuse oppression.

The term "neurodiversity" and the identity "neurodivergent" are meant to refer to varied intellectual styles and functions, including but not limited to intellectual disability, depression and anxiety, and autism. The terms are part of a countermovement to reframe cognitive difference, typically understood as limitation. Activists and scholars employing these terms expand the contextualizing conversation about disability to include cognition, both because the mind and the body are deeply intertwined (some use the phrase "bodymind") and because, unfortunately, political interventions regarding disability have often been limited to the physical (Price 2014). Such a limitation on the conversation misses much of what disability is.

Transhumanists—enthusiastic supporters of human enhancement—have long published dreams for the future arguing that we must be radically different if we hope to live well. Their bioethical visions, however, are harmful, and denigrate the lives of already-existing persons. They suggest that human enhancement requires negative eugenics—that is, selection and shaping of future populations. (For a book-length treatment of this issue, see Hall 2016). They prioritize intellectual capacity as measured by IQ and connect IQ to quality of life (Bostrom 2008). They assume that disability can be isolated in-utero and that it is rational to avoid carrying a disabled fetus to term (Savulescu 2001). They argue that we are unfit for the future and that successfully dealing

with large-scale problems requires enhancement, including moral enhancement through pharmaceutical means (Persson and Savulescu 2012). Other bioethicists argue that solving large-scale problems like climate change could require genetic selection (Liao et al. 2012). These visions fundamentally exclude disabled people from the future. Furthermore, bioethicists working in this speculative vein make two fundamental mistakes. They treat both disability and the future as inert and predictable. When Julian Savulescu and Ingmar Persson suggest that we are unfit for the future, they presume to know what skills and cognitive styles will be valuable for the future (2012). Yet, forms of life and difference are knit through complex interactions with environments. Disability is contingent, as is the future. Savulescu and Persson have not convinced me that their predictions of the future and presumptions about what lives are best are accurate or warranted. As philosophers are fond of saying, we have no guarantee that the future will look like the past. As they are not fond of saying, we need disability to live well in the future.

Consider the speculative fiction of Nnedi Okorafor and N. K. Jemisin. In the Binti trilogy (2019), Okorafor builds a character who stims (self-soothes) through "treeing," a process that at times is depicted by the author as similar to a seizure, but is also frequently depicted as something like meditation. When Binti, the titular character and hero, trees, she runs complex mathematical equations through her mind at a terrific pace. She is connected to her home planet and region through a practice of covering her skin and hair in clay, and after a deadly encounter that connects her with a member of a species she considers an enemy, her hair becomes a graft between Binti and this other species. Her neurodiversity and bodily difference become the key to required intergalactic, cross-species negotiation in a fundamentally new world with new requirements. There is no purity for Binti, not in terms of embodiment or in terms of her loyalties. She is a liminal figure operating in a radical geopolitical space very unlike our own. Not only does Okorafor avoid assuming she knows what counts as disability, Okorafor varies the setting in which the character of Binti finds herself, showing that the complex dynamic between embodiment and world conditions the character and meaning of disability. There is no need to directly relate Binti's character to a particular disability, as Okorafor's work is a demonstration of the political and historical contingency of diagnosis and neurodiversity. Binti is the neurodiverse hero that bioethicists fail to imagine when they consider the needs of the future. In *Who Fears Death*, another impure hero—the product of rape by colonizing forces who embodies visible difference in skin tone—is our protagonist. Her difference has new meaning because it has been reframed by context, intertwining in unexpected ways with her environment and again demonstrating the contingency of the meanings of neurodiversity and disability more generally.

In the Broken Earth trilogy, N. K. Jemisin radically engages an apocalyptic future vis-à-vis climate (2015, 2016, 2017). Her work is another example of science fiction showing the poverty of speculation about the future, especially about climate catastrophe, in bioethics. Jemisin's vilified protagonists, called "orogenes," who are connected to the tremors of the earth and can quell them, alongside her mythical stone eaters who descend from the deadly convergence between person and planet, become key players in another example of a delicate negotiation, this time with a planet bled dry. A coalition between these groups, and terrific effort that chews away the body, makes that negotiation possible.

Again, I claim that both bioethics and science fiction are sites of the construction of disability, including neurodiversity. Constructions can be liberating, confining, and often both. Both literatures I gesture toward here inscribe the meaning of disability and both dream of the future. But in whose speculative imagination does disability flourish? While science fiction is no stranger to eugenic visions, I argue that fantastical utopias playing out in bioethics are fundamentally eugenic, uniting the desire for perfect-

-ion with the rejection of difference (Hall 2016). Rayna Rapp and Faye Ginsburg argue that we must make disability count for the future, rather than counting—and attempting to eliminate—disability (Ginsburg and Rapp 2015). New work in science fiction, as evidenced by Jemisin and Okorafor, is poised to make disability count. I celebrate their novel constructions of neurodiversity and disability. What will the future be like, and who will we be within that future? Jemisin and Okorafor illustrate provocative answers to that question.

References

Bostrom, N (2008). Why I want to be a posthuman when I grow up. In B. Gordijn & R. Chadwick (Eds.), *Medical enhancement and posthumanity* (107-136). Springer. Retrieved from https://www.springer.com/gp/book/9781402088513

Garland-Thomson, R (2002). Integrating disability, transforming feminist theory. *NWSA Journal,* 14 (3), 1-32.

Ginsburg, F., & R. Rapp (2015). Making disability count: Demography, futurity and the making of disability publics. *Somatosphere* (May).

Hall, M (2016). *The bioethics of enhancement: Transhumanism, disability, and biopolitics.* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Jemisin, N.K. (2015). Creating races. Retrieved from http://nkjemisin.com/2015/08/creating-races/

Jemisin, N. K. (2015). *The Fifth Season.* Orbit.

Jemisin, N. K. (2016). *The Obelisk Gate.* Orbit.

Jemisin, N. K. (2017). *The Stone Sky.* Orbit.

Liao, S. M., A. Sandberg, & R. Roache (2012). Hu man engineering and climate change. *Ethics, Policy & the Environment*, 15(2), 206-221.

Okorafor, N (2019). *Binti: The Complete Trilogy.* DAW.

Okorafor, N (2010). *Who Fears Death.* DAW.

Persson, I., & J. Savulescu (2012). *Unfit for the future: The need for moral enhancement.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Price, M (2014). The bodymind problem and the possibilities of pain. *Hypatia,* 26 (3), 268-284.

Savulescu, J (2001). Procreative beneficence: Why we should select the best children. *Bioethics,* 15 (5-6), 413-426.

Tremain, S (2001). On the government of disability. *Social theory and practice*, 27 (4), 617-636.

Tremain, S (2017). *Foucault and feminist philosophy of disability.* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2019
ISSN 2472-0837

Reflections

A Quiet House That Speaks Volumes: A Reflection of *A Quiet Place*

By: Dolphia Butler

Director John Krasinski's *A Quiet Place* (2018) is a science fiction horror film that portrays the lives of a family of five—and then four, and then back to five again—living in crumbling New York. From the start of the film, the audience quickly learns how important is it for the family of two parents, Lee and Evelyn Abbott, and three children, Regan, Marcus, and Beau, to remain silent. If even a minute sound is made, humans are snatched away by the aliens who have invaded America. The aliens then replace humans with extraterrestrial beings. Unfortunately, the youngest child, Beau, ignores the rules of silence and is immediately taken away by the aliens. By the end of the film, the family remains intact—for the most part—because of Regan's invisible power, her deafness. Thus, this reflection piece focuses on the positive and realistic representations of Deaf culture in Krasinski's science fiction horror film.

Not much verbal dialogue takes place in the film. Instead, the Abbotts communicate through American Sign Language (ASL), a visual language that requires the use of hands, fingers, facial expressions, and gestures to make meaning. Because the oldest child Regan is deaf, the Abbotts effortlessly use ASL, the native language of deaf people, to converse with each other. Although the rest of Regan's family is hearing, they abstain from using Signed Exact English (SEE)—a sign system that uses English's vocabulary and grammar to make meaning. SEE is a language that hearing people use when conversing with deaf people. However, ASL and SEE are two different languages that do not mirror one another. According to Padden and Humphries (2006), "Signs from ASL are often thought to be direct representations of spoken words, but in fact they are independent of English. Although signs and their translations may have overlapping meanings, signs are not simply codes for English words" (p. 394).

Though the Abbotts sign in ASL, the closed caption feature for the film was in Standard Written English (SWE) and tended to be more elongated than the actual signed dialogue. In addition, Beal-Alvarez and Cannon (2014) say that closed caption could be prey to "information [being] rapidly here and gone without the option of speed control or printed output for later reference" (p. 501). If deaf persons are watching the film, they would have to read the caption on the television and watch the action at the same time, especially in scenes when the Abbotts are not signing, to understand the film's plot. Thus, watching the film and reading closed caption simultaneously could be problematic for deaf viewers.

In *A Quiet Place*, Regan experiences feelings of alienation within her hearing family. She becomes angry when she has to remain with her mother while her father and Marcus venture into the woods together. In another scene, she bickers with Marcus about their father and his lack of love for Regan because she is different. The film portrays Regan as an outsider, which Baynton (2006) says that "the metaphors of deafness—of isolation and foreignness, of animality, of darkness and silence—are projections reflecting the needs and standards of the dominant culture, not the experiences of most deaf people" (p. 46). Although she spends some time alone in several scenes of the film and can be viewed either as an independent and brave character or an isolated character, Regan becomes overly introspective about her life. Baynton says that deaf people "could resist the meanings that hearing people attached to deafness, adopt them and put them to new uses, or create their own" (p. 47). Regan spends her time alone reflecting and uses her cultural space—her deafness—to do so. She sits in solitude and in silence while contemplating about Beau, her father, her pregnant mother, and Marcus, the only surviving hearing child in the family. Finally, the film remarkably pays homage to Deaf culture when Regan expresses her annoyance with her father's attempts

A Quiet House That Speaks Volumes, continued

at building a hearing aid device that would allow her to hear. Edwards (2006) states, "When the Deaf community turns to technology, it seeks technology to enable the living of a richer Deaf life. But when hearing people offer technologies to deaf people, they have generally promoted medical technologies to eliminate deaf life" (p. 404). She rejects the idea of "curing" her deafness and prefers to use ASL as her primary mode of communication. Ironically, she still wears a hearing aid. It is as if she hopes that one day, she will be able to hear. Nevertheless, at the end of the film, it is Regan's hearing aid, and the ones her father builds, that keeps them alive. Because she blames herself for Beau's death, she determines to redeem herself by becoming the hero. Her hearing aids incapacitate the aliens. As a result, Regan does not "overcome" her deafness, she embraces it. Her family embraces it. Overall, this act of embracing, by both the hearing and deaf community, is the epitome of Deaf culture.

References

Baynton, D. (2006). "A silent exile on this earth: the metaphorical construction of deafness in the nineteenth century." In L. J. Davis (Ed.), *The Disability Studies Reader,* 33-51. New York, NY: Routledge.

Beal-Alvarez, J., & Cannon, J. E. (2014). "Technology intervention research with deaf and hard of hearing learners: levels of evidence." *American Annals of the Deaf*, 158(5), 486-505. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/26234923

Edwards, R.A.R. (2006). "Hearing aids are not deaf: a historical perspective on technology in the deaf world." In L. J. Davis (Ed.), *The Disability Studies Reader,* 403-416. New York, NY: Routledge.

Padden, C. & Humphries, T. (2006). Deaf people: A different center. In L. J. Davis (Ed.), *The Disability Studies Reader,* 393-402. New York, NY: Routledge.

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2019
ISSN 2472-0837

Reflections

Disability in Science Fiction Literature: A Reflection on Technology and Mental Disabilities

By: Philip Steiner

Disability in SF novels is quite a multifaceted phenomenon. On the one hand, many fictional visions of the future simply avoid disabilities, presuming that one day humanity will be able to cure any disability through advanced medicine and technology. On the other hand, however, many SF authors speculate about the disabilities that such highly developed societies could bring forth. Consequently, a frequently underlined assumption is that every society, no matter how highly developed, has its own unique set of disabilities.

A prime example of this future-specific approach is served by Isaac Asimov's robot novels. Hardly any physical disabilities are portrayed in these texts, yet what is presented with significant regularity are the boundaries of the mind, especially in the last installment of the series *Robots and Empire*.

Firstly, the people of earth live in the so-called caves of steel, completely unable to survive in the outside world and alienated from nature. Secondly, there are the people of Solaria, who do not mind strolling around in the natural world, yet, on the other hand, shy away from physical contact with others. They never "view" each other in person, the only option for interpersonal contact is to "see" others over video screens. Lastly, the advanced Aurorans also have their own disabilities. Their longevity coupled with their immense egos is shown to be inherently problematic for progress. Asimov foregrounds, through both the fictional planets, Aurora and Solaria, that our own mortality is, indeed, essential. The next generation has to take over to keep humanity's social evolution going. On Aurora and Solaria, however, cooperation and reproduction are largely frowned upon and kept to a minimum. The individual scientist who dedicates centuries to the progress of society — as is for example represented in the character of Dr. Fastolfe — is the cultural icon of the spacer worlds.

Asimov highlights that it is this iconization of the lone wolf scientist, in combination with their complete dependency on robots and their extreme longevity which leads to societal stagnation and, in the long run, decay. Thus, the spacers of Aurora and Solaria serve as a glimpse of the negative ramifications of severely extended human lifespans and overdependence on technology. This message is foregrounded as the settlers from Earth manage to overcome the aforementioned mental and social disabilities, which hold back the people of Aurora, Solaria, and Earth, on their new planet Baleyworld. The vanishing of these disabilities is portrayed to directly correlate with the exclusion of robots from the face of newly founded human societies, as their technological perfection is highlighted as one of the major culprits for humanity's downward spiral.

William Gibson, as a second example, has quite a different take on disabilities, displayed in his short stories and *Neuromancer* novels. Characters such as Case, the protagonist of *Neuromancer*, are depicted as being extremely drawn to drug use, a need which constitutes a severe disability of its own. The dimensions of substance abuse in Gibson's stories are fascinating, as they not only create boundaries and issues for the characters to overcome, but also seem to enable said characters to endure the hardships of their very existences.

Furthermore, in his short stories, "The Winter Market" and "Dogfight," Gibson (in "Dogfight" together with Swanwick) also puts the spotlight on disabled characters and how technology shapes their lived experiences. Lise, one of the main characters from "The Winter Market," can only survive because of her modern exoskeleton and aspires to free her mind from her material shackles. Our question then becomes, do we lose our humanity when we overcome all of our disabilities, all of our flesh's boundaries? The fate of Lise and a handful of other name-

-less characters, who transcend the body by digitizing their minds, suggests otherwise. In this Gibson's work echoes the final novel of Asimov's robot cycle.

In "Dogfight" Deke, Nance, and Tiny are all disabled in different ways. Deke and Nance have undergone mental programming that prevents them from having certain experiences, and Tiny is bound to a wheelchair due to unknown causes. Each of them seeks to overcome their limits through technology and biotechnology. Yet, as we can see with the social downfall of Deke, who supposedly kills Nance, his only friend, and later on with Tiny's failure in a video game against Deke, Gibson's technology functions as a temporal escape with a harsh timer. Again, modern technology takes the form of a drug that sustains the lives of Gibson's run-down characters until it too, eventually fails them.

As a final example, Dan Simmons' *Hyperion* series, when compared to the works of Asimov and Gibson, represents disabilities in a more traditional fashion. A prime example of this is the speech impairment of Martin Silenus during a segment of his story in the first book. It is a sequence that is only roughly ten pages long, but the struggle of the bad-mannered, yet ingenious, poet Silenus, who can only communicate and write with a handful of swear words, calls to mind the despair that speech impairment can cause an otherwise healthy and intelligent person.

Furthermore, the interplay of decay and immortality triggered by technology is also taken up by Simmons. The Bikura, who are featured in the first story told by the character Lenar Hoyt, are a prime example of how overdependence on technology comes with a price. They are immortal, yet doomed to a sexless, mindless existence, their brains infantilized by constant rebirth through the power of the cruciform. This negative aspect of techno-dependency is further highlighted when the hegemony falls apart in *Fall of Hyperion* and the greatest part of the population dies because their survival depends on technological marvels, such as the farcasters.

A last fascinating take on disability from the *Hyperion* series is the story of Rachel Weintraub and her father Sol. Rachel catches a mystical illness called Merlin's sickness, which reverses her aging process, making her forget her life by the day. Sol Weintraub struggles with his daughter's sickness and the challenge of her memory impairment, while Rachel despairs as she loses her identity. The way this dramatic story is rendered makes it a stunning and convincing metaphor for the struggles that families and patients go through when they develop dementia. It reflects on the suffering of relatives, who have to accept that there is no way to save their loved ones, no way to retain their personalities; also, the constant fear experienced by a parent to a heavily disabled child for its health, and the agony of losing the foundation of one's identity. All of these aspects are mirrored in Simmons' alternative concept of dementia.

As I have showcased in this short reflection, the absence of future disabilities is, in my humble opinion, only one side of the coin, when it comes to the representation of disabilities in SF novels. Asimov, Gibson and Simmons, as well as many other SF authors, such as Margret Atwood, Dmitry Glukhovsky, or Arthur C. Clark, present distant future worlds to the readers, in most of which the condicio humana is still significantly shaped by disabilities.

References

Asimov, Isaac (1985/2018). *Robots and Empire*. London: Harper Collins Publishers.

Gibson, William. (First published in 1984/2016). *Neuromancer*. London: Gollanez.

---. The Winter Market. [First published in 1986/2016]. In Gibson, William. *Burning Chrome,* 126-151. London: Gollanez.

Disability in Science Fiction Literature, continued

References (cont...)

---. And Swanwick, Michael "Dogfight". [First published in 1985/2016]. In Gibson, William. *Burning Chrome*, 152-178. London: Gollanez.

Simmons, Dan (1989). *Hyperion.* Doubleday. USA

Simmons, Dan (1990). *The Fall of Hyperion.* Doubleday. US

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2019
ISSN 2472-0837

Becoming Disabled

by Dadu Shin

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2019
ISSN 2472-0837

Subversive Texts: Illness and Disability in Chinese Contemporary Science Fiction

Haihong Li, Xiamen University Tan Kah Kee College

Abstract: As a growing discipline, disability studies have proven to be a rewarding strategy for rereading cultural texts where more traditional critical approaches fail. Especially in the scholarship surrounding science fiction, disability often offers new possibilities in interpreting texts. Following this trend, this paper will focus on the representations of disability in selected contemporary Chinese SF writings and analyze their implications. Considering the fact that many contemporary Chinese SF writers are gaining international prominence, it is surprising to see how little has been written about them. To contribute to a better understanding of Chinese science fiction, this paper argues that the themes of illness and disability in Chinese contemporary SF narratives can be treated as the writers' strategic use of the genre as social commentary to articulate concerns which would have been otherwise censored. Many SF writers and critics in the West are interested in the great potential and power of technology in relation to illness and disability. In contrast, Chinese SF writers are more concerned with the damages that over-reliance on advanced technology may cause to the underprivileged groups. Therefore, instead of making their protagonists beneficiaries of technological advancement, Chinese SF authors often describe individuals as victims. Furthermore, their stories also challenge the hegemonic narrative of harmony, healthiness, and happiness propagated by the authorities. In the following discussion, I shall focus on Chinese SF writers who were born between the late 1970s and 1980s, including Liu Cixin, Chan Koonchung, Hao Jinfang, Xia Jia, and Ma Boyong.

Keywords: illness, disability, Chinese contemporary literature, science fiction

In response to economic and political changes, the Chinese government constantly adopts new cultural policies in its discourse of nation-building. This has enabled it to maintain a stable ideological transition in the post-Maoist era. In the 1980s, while shifting gear from the planned economy to the free market mode, Deng Xiaoping explained the reason for the economic reform; "The purpose of socialism is to make the country rich and strong" (Meisner, 1982, p.238). Twenty years later, the promotion of the "Harmonious Society" by General Secretary Hu Jintao was a necessary strategy adopted to cope with the increasing social conflicts arising from unbalanced economic growth. In 2012, President Xi came into power and introduced the Chinese dream, promising Chinese citizens material abundance and ultimate happiness. And, in a very short period of four years, this dream seems to already be coming true. *Qiushi journal,* a propaganda magazine owned by China's most powerful state-run news agency Xinhua, proudly announced, "Never have the Chinese people been so close to realizing their dreams than today" (Xinhua, 2017). Furthermore, even lifting the presidential term limit was related to the happiness of the nation as the *China Daily* interpreted the change as having been made to "ensure people live happier lives" (as cited in Philips, 2018)). In such a socio-economic landscape, representations of the nation related to poverty, environmental degradation, suffering, and disease, are often avoided or censored. Take Chinese science fiction stories as an example. Ye Yonglie, one prominent SF writer in the 1980s, wrote a story titled "the Disease of Love," concerning the spreading of AIDS and medical workers' battle against it in China. However, it was rejected for publication due to severe critiques, which asserted that since there was no AIDS in China at the time such a story would only draw unwanted attention from the West and therefore cause trouble (Ye, 2011,p.403). Such

an absurd dismissal exposes, first of all, the critics' failure to acknowledge that the SF genre is, by nature, an exploration of possibilities in the future rather than a faithful mirroring of the present. Secondly, it gives away the ingrained fear of invoking Western interventions.

Presentation of Illness and Disability in China

Illness and disability in general remain underrepresented in Chinese literature and history for cultural and historical reasons. For instance, Chinese words for illness and disability remind one of defect, limitation, and shame: the characters for illness are jibing (疾病) and for disability canji (残疾). Such terms contain negative connotations that evoke feelings of shame and disgrace. The meanings of illness and disability in Chinese characters suggest something opposite to the whole, the normal, and the healthy, for the character ji (疾) means disease, pain, and suffering while can (残) means incomplete and damaged. As a result, literature tends either to not engage fully with such descriptions, or often gives negative representations which convey a sense of disgust, humiliation, guilt, or even hate.

Representation of illness and disability in China is political, national, and transnational in nature. Take disability as an example. Although social awareness has been raised through the efforts of the China Disabled Persons' Federation (CDPF) as well as some grassroots movements in the late 1980s, disability still receives little attention from the public. Part of the reason that disability is underrepresented comes from the lack of a disability identity or a social model of disability. Indeed, who can be defined as disabled? Taking into consideration national pride and international scientific competition, Chinese authorities have their own standards as to who is considered disabled and who is not. Matt--hew Kohrman examines how China's party-state manipulated data to reflect a healthy proportion of a disability statistic in China's 1987 National Sample Survey of Disable Persons. In his article "Why Am I not Disabled? Making State Subjects, Making Statistics in Post-Mao China," Kohrman concludes, "The ongoing need to demonstrate a high level of ability, to conform to perceived international normalizing benchmarks of scientific competence and national respectability, were important factors in how [people from the government] frame disablement" (Kohrman, 2013, p.19).

The issue of disability in China is not only national and international, but also social and political. In 2008, the Law of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on the Protection of Persons with Disabilities defined a person with disabilities as "one with visual, or hearing, or speech, or physical, or intellectual, or psychiatric disability, multiple disabilities, and/or other disabilities" (as cited in Fjelde and Sagli, 2011, P.33). In their article, Fjelde and Sagli argue that such an official definition is based not on a social model but a medical model which, as a result, excludes many dysfunctional or disfigured citizens. The traditional medical model regards disability as "an individual deficit to be cured" while the social model views disability as "a culturally and historically specific phenomenon" (Shakespear, 2011, p.195). When denied access to disability privileges, these people are left on their own, although they sometimes form organizations to help one another. According to Xi Chen and Ping Xu, "Disabled people have traditionally shown a stronger tendency for self-organization than other groups because of a stronger need for mutual help and protection. This is still true in the PRC, even though such organizations are prohibited" (Chen & Xu, 2011, p.663).

One prime example of the dilemma the government policies create for the disabled is the film *Dying to Survive*, released in 2018 and directed by Wen Muye (文牧野). The story is inspired by the the true life of Lu Yong (陆勇), a Chinese leukemia patient who took great risks to smuggle generic medicine from India to help his fellow Chinese patients. The Chinese title for the movie is wobushiyaoshen (我不是药神), which literally means "I am no god of medicine." In reality, Lu Yong played the role of a hero in that he saved many people's lives by helping them

Subversive Texts, continued

purchase foreign anticancer medicine, which was not accessible to them at that time. The reason that these people were caught up in such a dilemma is that Chinese national medical insurance did not cover the treatment of leukemia and medicine in China was way too expensive for average Chinese families. Under such circumstances, patients from families without great financial advantages could not afford the cure and were left with no other choice but to die. In 2015, Lu Yong was arrested and charged with selling counterfeit medicine, but the case was soon dropped as patients he had helped appeared at court to petition for his release. The story, on the one hand, praises the heartwarming heroic act of Lu Yong. On the other hand, it subtly calls into question the legal and medical practice of the government.

It is a rather difficult task to define science fiction due to its complex nature. As many critics have tried to give it a precise description, the most famous probably comes from Darko Suvin who emphasized novum, i.e. innovation, in science fiction narratives and concluded that science fiction was "a literary genre whose necessary cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to author's empirical environment" (Suvin, 1979, p. 8-9). With this in mind, I have chosen Chinese contemporary science fiction stories that are most accessible to the English audience in this paper. Here included for discussion are the following works: Chan Koonchung's book *The Fat Years*, Ma Boyong's short novel "The City of Silence," Hao Jinfang's "Folding Beijing," and Xia Jia's "A Hundred Ghosts Parade Tonight." The fact that all these stories take place in the future and that what happens in them is not possible in our world today characterizes them as science fiction according to Suvin's definition.

China's reintegration into the world plays an important role in the booming of the SF genre in China. In the late 1970s, as the nation opened up to foreign trade after Deng Xiaoping's open door policy, Western science fiction was reintroduced to China after a long ban. Influenced by these stories they read, Chinese writers started to incorporate their own life experience into SF narratives. Furthermore, growing up in a cultural environment different from their parents', the new generations became more interested in the future and the universe, which also paved ways for the renaissance of science fiction in China. Liu Cixin explains, "As modernization accelerated its pace, the new generation of readers no longer confined their thoughts to the narrow present as their parents did, but were interested in the future and the wide-open cosmos...This is rich soil for the growth and flourishing of science fiction" (Liu, 2016, para.20). Consequently, this renaissance contributes greatly to the rise of Chinese science fiction in the world.

Although for quite a while Chinese SF had been marginalized and neglected, more and more Chinese SF writers have started to gain international recognition in the past decade. For instance, Liu Cixin, who The New Yorker calls "China's Arthur C. Clarke," won the Hugo Award for his popular work *The Three-Body Problem* in 2015. The book was translated into English by the American Chinese writer Ken Liu who himself is also a prolific SF writer. In 2016, another Chinese SF writer, Hao Jingfang, who is a social entrepreneur as well as an economist, was granted a Hugo Award for her short novel "Folding Beijing," and became the first Chinese woman to ever have such an honor. In addition, the short story "A Hundred Ghosts Parade Tonight," written by Chinese woman writer Xia Jia, got a nomination for the Science Fiction & Fantasy Translation Awards in 2013. Chinese SF is also gaining increasing public esteem in the domestic market as many of the contemporary SF works become big budget movies or TV series.

Science fiction from China shares common traits with its Western counterparts, such as a fascination with technological progress and space, it also has distinct attributes and concerns closely related to the sociopolitical environment of China. For instance, as the host of the 2007 Sino-US Science

Subversive Texts, continued

Fiction Summit, Yan Wu points out the influence of the West as well as the Chinese political system on the development of Chinese SF: "there is a particular richness to [Chinese SF], involved as it is with the pursuit of emancipation, the resistance to oppressive systems, and the influence of foreign cultures" (Yan, 2013, p.2). Indeed, artistic freedom has been an unwavering concern for many writers and filmmakers in China. As one of the top SF writers in China, Liu Cixin was first introduced to Jules Verne's book *Journey to the Center of the Earth* during the Cultural Revolution, when cultural censorship was strictly implemented. In this historical period, Liu's favorite literary genre, science fiction, was condemned as "spiritual pollution" by the *People's Daily*, one of the most influential official newspapers of the party (Yin, 2018, para. 6). Such a dilemma is also best summed up by one character in Liu's well-acclaimed book *The Three Body Problem*; "Without unconstrained spirit there would be no great art, and yet how detained the Chinese spirits of today are" (as cited in Jia. 2018, p. 60).

Nonetheless, being a successful translator and writer, Ken Liu emphasizes a different aspect in Chinese contemporary science fiction. First of all, he acknowledges the common concerns regarding social problems among Chinese contemporary SF works: "Problems of modern development are also addressed, like environmental hazards and the negative effects coming from new technologies. Yet Chinese SF does have its own unique themes as well, such as the attempt to re-deduce and re-display the ancient history of China from an SF angle" (Barnett, 2016). Furthermore, according to Liu, the sense of anxiety and uncertainty, invoked by the reality of unbalanced development in China, dominates today's Chinese SF works. For instance, Chen Qiufan's SF novel *The Waste Tide*, translated by Ken Liu and originally published in 2013, chronicles the desperate experience of the underclass working and living on Silicon Isle, where imported electronic waste is recycled. Although it is a fiction, it is based on a real place called *guiyu*, not far away from where Chen grew up. The author's detailed descriptions of the severe environmental problems paint a rather grim picture of the future. In Chen's fictional world, anxiety is widespread as Silicon Isle is a highly toxic site where workers face daily struggle under degrading and harmful conditions while the local gangs exploit them ruthlessly. The strong sense of imbalance lies in the stark contrast between the bleak lives of the workers and the extravagant life style of the rich and powerful who care about nothing but profits.

Chinese SF and Disability

The following analysis has three parts. First, I shall examine Chan Koonchung's book *The Fat Years* and Ma Boyong's "The City of Silence" to illustrate the authors' tactful use of illness and disability to evade censorship while making social commentaries. Second, Hao Jingfang's "Folding Beijing" addresses emergent issues such as class polarization, social injustice, and rising inequality during China's rapid economic expansion. Through the main character's experience of almost losing his leg, the author brings attention to the vulnerability of the body and a prevalent sense of powerlessness and despair. Third, the fear and anxiety over accelerating globalization and growing corporate power are best epitomized in Liu Cixin's "Taking Care of Humans" and Xia Jia's "A Hundred Ghosts Parade Tonight." Both stories depict a dystopian world in which the impoverished people lose control over their bodies as bodies are commodified, dismembered, and exploited. In spite of the increasing popularity of Chinese science fiction among international audiences, little research or study has been done to further the understanding of the genre in the special cultural and political context of China. To contribute to a better appreciation of Chinese science fiction as well as a greater understanding of contemporary Chinese society, this paper shall focus on the representations of disability in selected Chinese contemporary SF stories to illustrate how these stories function as social commentary and critique and how they embody concerns and deep-seated anxieties

over social transformations and problems.

I. Illness, Disability, and Totalitarianism

Themes of illness and disability in literature can be powerful tools for social commentary under stringent and omnipresent censorship. Indeed, Chinese people face, arguably, some of the harshest censorship in the world and any disseminated information and private conversations can be recorded, traced, and investigated. According to the book *Internet Freedom and Political Space*, China and Syria are the countries having the most censorship. The authors point out, "[These two countries] have appeared on the top of the 'Internet Enemies" list put together by *Reporters Without Borders* and were also ranked in 2012 as 'not free' by the Freedom House in its report on the state of Internet freedom" (Tkacheva *et al.*, 2013, p.10). Under such circumstances, representation of disability often gives authors a voice to express themselves about sensitive social issues. For instance, David Der-wei Wang observed the sudden appearance of deformities in Chinese literature in the 1980s and argued that such an atmosphere is a response towards the trauma of the social disorder and upheavals; "The range of characters that emerge from the works of the New Period mainland Chinese writers include: the blind, the mute, the crippled, the humpbacked, the sexually impotent, the bound-feet fetishist, the osteomalacia victim, the "living dead," not to mention the mentally deranged and the psychotic" (Lau, 1993, p.21). According to Wang, the "Socialist New China," which had previously been represented as healthy and heroic, abruptly becomes a place populated with various forms of disabilities. The theme of disability is used as a literary tool to convey symbolic meanings commenting on the ongoing repression.

The incorporation of social commentary into science fiction started at the beginning of Chinese SF history. For instance, as one of the most important intellectuals in 20th-century China, Lao She wrote the SF story *Cat Country*. It not only reflects and refracts ills of Chinese society in the Late Qing and the New China, but is also a chilling prophecy about what was to come at the beginning of the Communist rule. With acute perception, Lao She's *Cat Country,* published in 1932, is a political satire. In the story, a man pays a visit to the cat country on Mars, in which cat-people are addicted to "reverie leaves," alluding to Chinese addiction to opium in the late Qing Dynasty, and the ruling elite is cruel and corrupt. Lisa Raphals observes, "We see that Lao She's cat people are the people of China. They are everything he sees as wrong with the China of his time: they are warlords, drug addicts, and moral and intellectual degenerates. They are passive and bring about their own eventual destruction" (Raphals, 2013, p.81). Lao She's fictional violence and terror in the story eventually turned into reality in 1966 during the Cultural Revolution and, unable to stand the brutality and torture, the author drowned himself in the Lake of the Great Peace.

The prime example of attack on totalitarian rule and censorship is Ma Boyong's "The City of Silence" (2005). The fictional world that Ma creates in his story is, ironically, not so fictional when compared with actual life experiences in China where political dissidents are silenced through various means. For instance, both in the story and in the real world online information is censored and manipulated. Any statement that challenges the status quo is to be deleted and anyone who is responsible for such a posting might face legal consequences. Also, Internet data is actively collected and analyzed to pry into netizens' private lives to ensure a tighter control of civil society. Surveillance cameras and racial recognition technology are deployed everywhere to watch citizens' every move. Taking the Chinese Internet of 2016 as an example, Lorand Laskai concludes that there is no escape from state control, "it is subject to a regime of ever-stricter control and supervision. A Chinese individual in 2016 has better chance of anonymity offline than online, away from the thousand prying eyes of China's army of censors" (Laskai, 2017, p.194). Following the example of George Orwell, who warned against a government that will resort to anything to control its people, Ma tells a similar story of the future authoritarian society

in which advanced technology enables the government to have a tighter grip on what one can or cannot say online and offline.

Ma's strong resentment of censorship is best demonstrated through his very act of writing about silence as a form of resistance itself, a gesture of nonconformity against the attempted control. By doing this, Ma pays tribute to Chinese writer Wang Xiaobo, who was a rebel in the way that he dared to question the absurdity of the Cultural Revolution. In Ma's story, when the male protagonist Arvardan first joins the Talking Club, he names himself "Wang Er" after the male protagonist appearing in several stories of Wang Xiaobo. Ma openly expresses his wish to inherit Wang's legacy of defiance and resistance against the authoritarian rule. As for the character Wang Er in Wang Xiaobo's story "The Golden Age," Sebastian Veg remarks, "the sheer sexual power of Wang Er, the protagonist of 'The Golden Age,' is intrinsically anti-authoritarian and therefore defines a form of resistance to the oppressive and all-encompassing (Maoist) state" (Veg, 2007, p.77). Like Wang Er, Arvardan is desperately looking for an escape from the stifling pressure of an oppressive society, and finds that vitality is closely tied to freedom to speak and free expression of one's sexuality.

Furthermore, the "List of Healthy Words" in Ma's story also resonates with the issue of language control in reality. Over the past decades, the Party-state has been tightening its control over language use online as well as offline. Any word that involves criticism of the government or deviates from the dominant ideology is deemed sensitive and therefore banned to maintain social and political order. Such a policy resulted in a long list which includes everything from "American horror movies, Bon Jovi and April Fool's Day to Muslim names, Pokémon Go, live Internet streams of women wearing stockings and suspenders eating bananas (yes, this is a thing), and some twelve thousand 'sensitive' words"(Golley and Jaivin, 2017, p. xv). Eventually, citizens either comply with such censorship or are forced to use code phrases in an attempt to express themselves freely.

Ma responds to this practice with strong criticism through showing how sick the male character Arvardan becomes under such circumstances. The "appropriate authorities," similar to George Orwell's "thought police," are not appropriate at all in that they violate privacy. Their omnipresent surveillance is highly intrusive and nerve-wrecking. To cover up their goal of control, they choose words such as "healthy" to leave the impression that their method is out of consideration for the common good. For example, as they force people to wear the Listener, a device to filter oral speech in private conversations, their justification is the following: "The appropriate authorities were attempting to gradually unify life on the Web and life in the physical world so that they would be equally healthy" (Ma, 2016, para. 39). However, such a policy only leads to the hopeless degradation of the individual. Arvardan constantly experiences anxiety disorders and even depression. His head feels heavy and slow. His poor health is reflected in the description of the surroundings: miasma, stale air, the "sharp inconsistent" phone ringing sound, the "pale white" computer, and "a leaden, oppressive sky" (Ma, 2016, para. 40). In his eyes, everything is off-balance, dull, and morbid. Additionally, forbidden to express true feelings about his sickness, he loses vitality, his health deteriorates, and minor anxiety attacks turn into serious depression. As the narrator describes, "The appropriate authorities In were like specters that filled the whole room, giving him no space. He was like a man stuck in a quagmire: as soon as he opened his mouth mud flowed in, so he could not even scream for help" (Ma, 2016, para. 35). The omniscience of the authorities and the enforced silence leads to damaging effects. To make it worse, the character is not allowed to talk about his suffering since the authorities deem any negative feelings an unhealthy portrait of the nation, so such vocabulary is therefore forbidden from being used. Yet it creates a vicious cycle in which not allowing the use of negative words generates more negative feelings and emotions.

A disruption that Arvardan witnesses in the street

Subversive Texts, continued

embodies civil disobedience taking the guise of a mental breakdown. It is obvious that the stranger named Hiroshi Watanabe has suffered from imposed silence as much as, if not more than, Arvardan does. However, Watanabe decides not to comply any more. One sign of his delirium manifests in his unusual excitement in spotting Arvardan. Watanabe's excitement arises from his imagining Arvardan as his confidant to whom he would reveal everything about himself. Watanabe deliberately breaks every law about silence as a revolt against silence. He refuses to wear the Listener and asks Arvardan for items such as alcohol and cigarettes, which are listed as sensitive. The scene speeds up as the volume of his voice goes up. Watanabe starts yelping and speaking quickly about himself. Then, overwhelmed by this slight taste of freedom, Watanabe's frenzy intensifies and he turns yelping into outright cursing and swearing. Watanabe's intention to rebel is clear as Arvardan continues, "this man was swearing at him in public, as though he wanted to say every single shielded sensitive word in a single breath" (Ma, 2016, para. 53). At the climax of the scene, the author's onslaught on censorship and ubiquitous surveillance becomes evident as Watanabe offers his seemingly illogical but insightful observation of the city and its power structure; "This whole city is an asylum, and in it, the stronger inmates govern the weaker inmates and turn all the sane people into madmen like themselves" (Ma, 2016, para. 51). Through the allegory of madness, Watanabe sharply points out the maddening and destructive effects of authoritarian rule and imposed silence as means of manipulating the population.

Watanabe is soon subdued by the police and order is restored. However, Ma makes an impressive argument that censorship is so violent and destructive that even violence in the arrest scene seems nothing to the character Watanabe. Speaking up against the rules gives Watanabe so much pleasure that he doesn't even mind getting jailed; "Arvardan watched as [Watanabe's] expression turned from madness to a contented smile, as though he were intoxicated by the pleasure and release brought about by the swearing" (Ma, 2016, para. 55). Watanabe's disruptive act, however short and small, plays an important role in the transformation of Arvardan's character since it awakens the latter's yearning and leads to his own act of rebellion in joining the "Talking Club" later on.

The main characters in Chan Koonchung's book *The Fat Years* (2009) suffer from different kinds of illnesses and disabilities, but, like the characters in Ma's story, also find it difficult to escape from social control in a heavily technologized society. In the story, Chan chronicles the experience of a small group of people who are surrounded by a weird sense of euphoria prevalent in his fictional world. Nonetheless, the sense of euphoria in the story was also felt by many Chinese citizens in real life, especially after the Beijing Olympics in 2008 according to the author's own observations. Chan explains,

> I sense the mentality of many Chinese shifting in that eventful year. They would argue China was doing alright after all and even its sometimes repressive system might have merits, while the West was definitely not as attractive as it used to be. Hardline loyalists became more assertive, trumpeting the achievements of the Communist Party, while those in the know saw no alternative but to become reluctant con formists. (Chan, 2012, para.4)

The story follows the male protagonist Old Chen's pursuit of a woman named Little Xi, a former judge turned Internet activist. Xi's sudden disappearance impels Chen to find her and, in the process, investigate the truth about a mysterious month missing from official records that all Chinese people seem to have forgotten. Representations of characters affected by illness and disability are central to this story and their illnesses and disabilities mark them as misfits and outsiders, in contrast to the rest of the people who seem perfectly content with the status quo.

Subversive Texts, continued

Collective amnesia is the engine that drives Chan's story forward. The allusion to the collective amnesia in China's recent history is obvious. Instead of trying to understand the past, they only want to live in the present with the feeling of "small-small high," the feeling of cheerfulness and satisfaction. The nationalist discourse of erasing or rewriting part of the history shows its efforts in making those unpleasant memories disappear in order to protect the one-party system. Eventually, the nation becomes what the mainstream media portrays - a society that stays in cheerful harmony with one-party rule. Julia Lovell points out,

> Its central conceit - that collective amnesia overtakes the entire country—is an all-encompassing metaphor for today's looming superpower and the question that lies behind its material renaissance since the 1980s—namely, whether a booming economy and an increasingly free individual society can be contained within the political straitjacket of a one-party system that seeks to retain all the levers of power for itself. (Chan, 2013, preface)

Chan's story is used as an allegory for a nation that loses its memories of the "unpleasant" past as the public, seemingly eager to move forward, conveniently forgets.

In addition to the collective loss of memory, major characters in the story are influenced by illness and disability to some extent and their health conditions further mark them as different. Old Chen's two friends, Fang Lijun and Zhang Dou, have asthma. Based on the fact they both have asthma and neither of them forgets the missing month, Fan Lijun comes to the conclusion that asthma must have something to do with their better memory.

Miao Miao, the former journalist and Zhang Dou's girlfriend, is stoned after she drinks chemically enhanced water. Henceforth, she smiles at everyone but does not talk any more. At the end, she does not even recognize people around her and no longer works, plays the guitar, or goes out. The aforementioned character, Little Xi, is always cautious and nervous, appearing almost crazy even to those who are close to her. Her own son Wei Guo wishes to confine her to a mental institution, for he sees her as an obstacle to his political career. As an exception, the high-ranking official He Dongsheng, who is the representative of the law, is troubled by insomnia. In the face of omnipresent surveillance and political rivals, he lives in a highly stressful condition and struggles with anxiety for a long time. The only time he has some rest is when he watches old movies in the companionship of his own cousin and Old Chen.

Similar to the addictive "reverie leaves" in Lao She's *Cat Country* and "soma" in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, drinking water in this fictional world is contaminated by drugs which make people forget their troubles and difficulties in life and consequently give in to their fate and stay happy. There is a factory that puts a methamphetamine, MDMA, in drinking water and mixes it with other beverages to keep people happy and influence their feelings about life.

Throughout the story, Old Chen repeatedly mentions that he feels content and everyone else does the same as the narrator describes: "Before he had the reunion with Little Xi, he had felt the harmony of the society, and every day he was touched by his own happiness" (Chan, 2013, p.138). When kidnapped by Old Chen and his friends, He Dong sheng confesses, "We want people to feel love but not aggression…that factory produces things that make people happy, filled with love, with no desire to attack others" (Chan, 2013, p.149).

II. Disability and Social Inequality

Hao Jinfang's *Folding Beijing*, the winner of the 2016 Hugo Award for Best Novelette, is an overt social commentary on a society in which disability can be inflicted as punishment for trespassing across class boundaries. The male protagonist Lao Dao works as a trash man who, in order to save up

up enough money to send his adopted daughter to a good kindergarten, risks his life and trespasses into other spaces to make extra money. In this fictional world, space is divided into three time slots occupied by different classes of people: 5 million powerful and rich people occupy the first space for 24 hours; 25 million middle-class citizens have 16 hours in the second space; 50 million lower class residents have only 8 hours in the third space. These three parts of Hao's folding city are assigned to different waking hours: three groups of people take turns to stay awake above the ground. As one stays above the ground and enjoys the waking hours the other two have to fold away, go underground, and sleep. Lao Dao, along with millions of others living in the third space, belongs to the lowest class of the society; powerless, marginalized, and voiceless. The insignificance of his position in the social hierarchy is best summed up as Hao describes, "He knew that he was nothing more than a figure. He was but an ordinary person, one out of 51,280,000 others just like him. And if they didn't need that much precision and spoke of only 50 million, he was but a rounding error, the same as if he had never existed. He wasn't even as significant as dust" (Section Five, para. 21). The sad truth about Lao Dao's humble existence is heartbreaking considering the risks he is willing to take simply to send his daughter to school, whereas the rich and powerful in the first space take such opportunities for granted and work is merely a pastime to avoid boredom. In the style of social realism, which offers a realistic representation of the daily struggle of the underclass, the story takes up social problems such as poverty, corruption, and injustice, and successfully uses the division of the space as an allegory for the widening income gap and increasingly rigid class division in today's China.

In the story, for instance, the gap between the rich and the poor is best demonstrated through the different time slots and the space allocated to three groups. The working class, assigned with only eight hours, has to share the same space with the middle class. The place they dwell in is characterized by chaos: inflation, huge crowds, loud noises, and various smells. However, the rich have First Space all to themselves for twenty four hours and their space is defined by cleanliness, tranquility, wide open views, and absolute order. The idea of boundaries between classes, allegorized by the difference spaces they occupy, is further reinforced through jail sentences and trespassing fines for any attempt to go to another space.

The issue of income disparity resonates with the reality of contemporary Chinese society. During its process of industrialization and urbanization, income disparity in China increased at a staggering pace and it contributes to the rise of conflict intensity. Taking into consideration the widening gap between the rich and the poor, Yongnian Zheng comes to the conclusion that Chinese citizens are getting angry and anxious as a result; "Although the government continued to make great efforts to improve the living standard of the grass roots under the established policy of 'building a harmonious society,' other factors such as high rates of inflation and widening income disparities have worsened people's living conditions, real or perceived" (Zheng, 2012, p.28). As the problem continues to get worse, it hurts the economic prospects of the majority and eventually produces uncertainty and fear. In the article "China's Dirty Little Secret: Its Growing Wealth Gap," Sidney Leng states, "Income inequality worsened for the first time in five years, with the top 1 per cent owning a third of the country's total wealth" (Leng, 2017). The growth of this income gap, if not reduced in time, will probably jeopardize the government's plan to create a harmonious society. The danger of physical impairment that almost costs Lao Dao his legs is symbolic of punishment as an essential means to maintaining class boundaries—any undesirable behavior that threatens to resist or protest the existing power structure will be severely penalized. Before Lao Dao returns to Third Space, a delay in the Change takes place because of a careless mistake made in First Space. In order to retri-

Subversive Texts, continued

-eve an important file before the Change, a very powerful man from First Space steals and manipulates time by postponing the Change. Without the least clue as to what is happening, Lao Dao is caught between two spaces. He is left completely trapped in the middle of the Change and loses control over his own life. Hao writes, "One of his lower legs was caught. Although the soil gave enough to not crush his leg or break his bone, it held him fast and he couldn't extricate himself despite several attempts. Sweat beaded on his forehead from terror and pain" (Section Five, para. 19). For his attempts at crossing borders, Lao Dao is placed in a predicament which is threatening to cause punitive physical impairment in order to normalize his deviant behavior. Through the incident, the criticism of the unfairness, injustice, and social inequality is epitomized in presenting the huge gap between two spaces. In contrast to the old man from First Space who steals time from Third Space and postpones the Change as he pleases, Lao Dao is facing grave danger. Hao describes Lao Dao's fears as follows: "He imagined that soon the police would arrive and catch him. They might cut off his leg and toss him in jail with the stump" (Section Five, para. 20). This graphic image of the stump foregrounds Lao Dao's vulnerable body in this poignant moment, and seeing through his eyes, the readers are invited into his world to feel his worst fears and deepest despair.

The excruciating pain that Lao Dao suffers further emphasizes the imposition of penalty and exclusion for his attempt to cross social boundaries. In his journey to First Space and back, Lao Dao constantly faces the risks of either being arrested, or suffering physical impairment. Such a dear price to pay simply to fulfill a basic request to obtain good education for his child again portrays Lao Dao as a victim of social inequality and injustice. Therefore, his pain and suffering symbolizes the social control that limits social mobility in order to maintain the current social hierarchical structure. After the Change is complete and Lao Dao finally walks out of the situation, the after-effects still haunt him. Hao gives an account of the excruciating pain, "As circulation returned to his numb leg, his calf itched and ached as though he was being bitten by thousands of ants. Several times, he almost fell. The pain was intolerable, and he had to bite his fist to stop from screaming. He fell; he got up; he fell again; he got up again. He struggled with all his strength and skill to maintain his footing over the rotating earth" (Section Five, para. 25). Through Lao Dao's experience, the author arrives at a social commentary indicating that the only way to survive such a hostile environment is to learn to respond quickly to one's surroundings, or one will risk, as the story has suggested, becoming disabled.

III. Disposable Bodies and Place

The exploitation of low-cost labor often implies an unregulated environment, long work-hours, unreasonably low wages, and poor or no social welfare--all of which are concerns relevant to many current Chinese SF writers. The following stories show, in such a context, how bodies are commodified and made disposable, and how the depicted broken bodies reflect a deep-seated fear and anxiety over the dehumanizing effects of global capitalism.

Commodification of the human body can be traced back to the early days of human history and it seems more active in the late capitalist period than ever by taking on new forms. In the book *Bodies for Sale: Ethics and Exploitation in the Human Body Trade*, Stephen Wilkinson examines different practices of commodification of the body and divides them into three categories: the commercialization of physical objects including buying and selling of human organs or body parts, the commercialization of abstract objects such as exploiting images of the body, and bodily services such as commercial surrogacy and DNA patenting Wilkinson, 2004, p.3). In today's world, new technology makes selling the human body much easier and more efficient than before. This worries some people since it enables the rich to purchase and consume the body parts of the poorer more easily and probably in a larger

Subversive Texts, continued

scale (Nahavandi, 2016, p2). Following this thread of thinking, critics such as Melissa W. Wright choose to focus on commodification of the body among specific groups of people. She is interested in the bodies of women and especially the exploitation of women from Third World countries by global capitalism.

Compared with other works of Liu Cixin, the story of "Taking Care of Humans" (2005) might be the most relentless attack on global capitalism and the merciless exploitation of the body. The theme of disposable bodies is manifested at the beginning of the story as the male protagonist Hua Tang, an assassin, refers to his human targets as "processed components," as if they were objects on an assembly line in a factory instead of real human beings with flesh and blood and emotions. Additionally, the story also shows that power is inscribed on the bodies of the most unfortunate in this dystopian world. Hua's old boss Chi has a saw with which he likes to maim human bodies. When a gambler loses a bet to Chi, the gambler offers his hands as stakes. Instead, Chi chops off his legs because in that way the gambler will still have his hands to gamble, such that Chi can make money out of the man. In his early days, Chi used to exploit children with disabilities by making them beggars in the cities. In order to transform one perfectly healthy girl of six years old into an effective beggar, Chi cuts off her leg and starves her. Without enough medication or food, the girl eventually dies under Hua's watch. The tragedy turns Hua's world upside down and makes him a ruthless assassin taking pleasure in killing. Hua's transformation can be viewed as a dehumanization process which results in Hua losing his humanity and becoming a killing machine.

In this story, Liu shows that human bodies are shaped and controlled by capital in a global economic system. In the economic mechanism of globalization, the bodies of these unfortunate people become disposable and power relations are inscribed on the bodies. It is inevitably dis-enabling and dehumanizing. If the body does not generate profit, it loses its value and is disposed of as if it were waste.

Similarly, Xia Jia's "A Hundred Ghosts Parade Tonight," translated by Ken Liu, also addresses the exploitation of the body against a capitalist backdrop, but with special attention paid to the increasing power of corporations and their negative impacts on body, community, and place. It is loosely based on a short story from Pu Sungling's ghost novel *Strange Stories from Chinese Studio* in the 18th century. Xia's short story not only appropriates Pu's main characters such as Ning, Xiao Qian, and Chi Lianxia, but also follows Pu's critique of a callous society. Both authors express sympathy towards the underprivileged and criticize the privileged and the powerful.

Body politics play a vital role in Xia's story. Ning's foster mother Xiao Qian used to be a "real" woman who has raised seven children. However, when she cannot pay the medical bills for her children, she literally has to sell her body parts one at a time. Xia describes, "And then her children got sick, one after another. In order to raise the money to pay the doctors, Xiao Qian sold herself off in pieces: teeth, eyes, breasts, heart, liver, lungs, bone marrow, and finally, her soul. Her soul was sold to Ghost Street, where it was sealed inside a female ghost's body. Her children died anyway" (Xia, 2012, para. 27). Ning himself also turns out to be a malfunctioning cyborg that fails to grow after the age of seven.

In the Ghost Street, many residents' deformed bodies are made into spectacles and become part of a show to attract human tourists. For instance, Cyclopes on the parade night carries a palanquin on which Xiao Qian performs. Here, the body is a valuable commodity, but it can quickly turn into a disposable item when it stops making money.

The broken bodies are closely associated with the disintegration of the social and physical environment. Over the past decades, eviction has become familiar to the Chinese masses and the overheated real estate market is often linked with images of

large-scale demolition and construction. However, complicated and sensitive issues resulting from eviction, such as displacement, replacement, and resettlement are rarely discussed by the state-controlled media. For instance, large numbers of residents were forcibly displaced for the Shanghai World Expo in 2010. Yet the media presented it as a rather positive event and described it as yangguang dongqian, meaning "sunshine displacement and resettlement." Yunpeng Zhang compares such an experience of forced eviction to the experience of a war and notes, "By appealing to the symbolic meanings of sunlight in expelling darkness and conjuring up feelings of warmth, security, trust and vibrancy, the party-state choreographed itself as a compassionate, caring and paternalistic savior" (Zhang, 2017, p.98). In Xia's ghost story, forced eviction and demolition is a horrific experience. The Ghost Street, like the bodies of the residents, is torn up piece by piece near the conclusion of the story. When the Thunder Calamity, the name given to the forced demolition by the ghost residents, finally arrives, the residents/ghosts are burnt to ashes. Xia narrates, "The ghosts hiding in the houses are chased into the middle of the street. As they run, they scream and scream, while their skin slowly burns in the faint sunlight. There are no visible flames. But you can see the skin turning black in patches, and the smell of burning plastic is everywhere" (Winter Solstice Section, para. 28). Ning watches the whole place fall into debris and ruins and describes the loss of a symbol of the once cohesive community as follows: "The great and beautiful main hall is torn apart bit by bit, collapses, turns into a pile of rubble: shingles, bricks, wood, and mud. Nothing is whole" (Winter Solstice Section, para. 26).

Furthermore, the image of broken bodies constantly intersects with the broken place and community in the last scene. When Xiao Qian's lover Yan Chixia tries to resist the eviction and demolition process with his sword, his head is chopped off by robot spiders. When Ning comes to avenge Yan and takes over his sword, Ning's head also separated from his body. Finally coming to terms with his true identity as cyborg, Ning smiles and recollects memories of the place as it perishes before his eyes; "I grew up on this street; I ran along this street. Now I'm finally going to die on this street, just like a real person" (Winter Solstice Section, para. 50). In Xia's story, the dismemberment of bodies and communities proves to be emotional, violent, and damaging. The bodies, like the Street itself, are repeatedly exploited, torn apart, and rebuilt, all towards the goal of profit maximization in a consumer society.

Conclusion

Because of the limited space here, this paper only includes a small number of Chinese contemporary SF novels. However, as suggested in this paper, the themes of illness and disability in Chinese contemporary SF works offer new insights into the understanding of contemporary social reality. By writing about themes of illness and disability, these novels resist the hegemonic narrative of "healthy," "strong," and "clean" promoted by the government. The descriptions of illness and disability in Chinese SF writing reveal the social commitment of the writers. The fact that these writers chose these subjects is itself meaningful.

However, within these stories there is no proposal for solutions that would allow people to escape their gloomy future. As a matter of fact, they are depicted as passive and subdued as they do not challenge the status quo but continue to suffer. The characters eventually yield to their fates; they either barely survive or simply perish. For the battles between the subjects and the system, there is no hope of winning: in *The Fat Years,* Chen and his friends migrate to the south to run away from the fake "small-small high" feelings, whereas Arvardan in "the City of Silence" continues his lifeless and empty existence after losing the last chance to speak. Lao Dao in "Folding Beijing" returns to where he comes from—Third Space—with his hard-earned money in hope of raising his daughter to be like a young woman from First Space. The fate of humans is no better than that of cyborgs in Xia Jia's "Ghosts Parade Tonight," as human bodies are commodified and sold

Subversive Texts, continued

part by part until they are all gone. Driven by the same logic of capitalism, Hua Tang in Liu Cixin's "Raising Humans" has to kill the poor in spite of his feelings for them. Nonetheless, in spite of the problems presented in these stories, the people still manage to survive, albeit not in a very graceful or dignified manner.

Subversive Texts, continued

References

Allan,K. (2013). *Disability in Science Fiction: Representations of Technology as Cure*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Barnett, D. (2016). "People Hope My Book Will Be China's *Star Wars*": Liu Cixin on China's Exploding Sci-fi Scene. *The Guardian*, Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/dec/14/liu-cixin-chinese-sci-fi-universal-the-three-body-problem

Chan, A. (2001). *China's Workers under Assault: the Exploitation of Labor in a Globalizing Economy*. New York: Routledge.

Chan, K. (2013). *The Fat Years*. M. S. Duke. (Trans.). New York, NY: Anchor Books.

Chan, A. (2012). Chinese author: "my book was banned in my home country." *Huffpost*, Retrived from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/book-banned-china_b_1211552

Chen, X. & Xu, P. (2011, September). Resistance to advocacy: political representation for disabled people in China. *The China Quarterly*, 207, 649-667.

Dauncey, S. (2013). A face in the crowd: imagining individual and collective disabled identities in contemporary China. *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, 25(2), 130-165.

Fjeld, H. & Sagli, G. (2011). Disability, poverty and healthcare: changes in the canji ('disability') policies in the history of the People's Re public of China. In A. H, Eide & B, Ingstad (Eds.). *Disability and poverty: A global challenge.* Bristol: Bristol University Press.

Frazier, M. W. (2004). China's pension reform and its discontents. *The China Journa*l, 51 (Jan), 97-114.

Golley, J. & Jaivin, L. (2017). Introduction fifty shades of red. In Golley, J &Jaivin, L & Tomba, L. (Eds). *Control* . ANU Press.

Haas, B. (2017). Xi Jingping speech: five things you need to know. *The Guardian*, Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/18/xi-jinping-speech-five-things-you-need-to-know

Hao, Jingfang. (2015). Folding Beijing (K. Liu, Trans.). *Uncanny: A Magazine of Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Retrieved from https://uncannymagazine.com/article/folding-beijing-2/

Huss, M. (2000). Hesitant journey to the West: SF's Changing Fortunes in Mainland China." *Science Fiction Studies*, 27(1), 92-104.

Jia, L. (2018). Chinese people not only live in the world but grow in the universe: Liu Cixin and Chinese science fiction (L. Du & J. Fashimpaur, Trans.). *Chinese Literature Today*. 7(1), 59-61.

Keck, Z. (2013). Poverty and Old Age in China. *The Diplomat,* China Power, Retrieved from https://thediplomat.com/2013/06/poverty-and-old-age-in-china/

Kohrman, M. (2003). Why am I not disabled? Making state subjects, making statistics in post-Mao China. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly.* 17(1), 5-24.

Kuhn, R. L. (2013). Xi Jinping's Chinese dream. The *New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/05/opinion/global/xi-jinpings-chinese-dream.html

Laskai,L. (2017). Nailing jello to a wall. In Golley,J &Jaivin,L & Tomba, L (Eds), *Control*, 194-195. ANU Press.

Lau, J. S. M. (1993). Han Shaogong's Post-1985 fiction. In E, Widmer & D. D,Wang (Eds) *From May Fourth to June Fourth: fiction and film in twentieth-Century China (19-42*), Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press.

Leng, S. (2017). China's dirty little secret: its growing wealth gap. *South China Morning Post.* Retrieved from https://www.scmp.com/news/china/economy/article/2101775/chinas-rich-grabbing-bigger-slice-pie-ever

Liu, C. (2016). The worst of all possible universes and the best of all possible earths: three-body and Chinese science fiction (K. Liu Trans.). In K. Liu (Ed). *Invisible Planets: 13 Visions of the Future* [Kindle DX version].

Subversive Texts, continued

References (cont.)

Retrieved from Amazon.com

Lovell, J. Preface. In Chan, K. *The Fat Years*. M. S. Duke (Trans.). New York: Anchor Books.

Ma, B. (2016). The city of silence (K. Liu Trans.). In K. Liu (Ed). *Invisible Planets: 13 Visions of the Future.* [Kindle DX version]. Retrieved from Amazon.com

Meisner, M. (1982). *Marxism, Maoism and, Utopianism*, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

Nahavandi, F. (2016). *Commodification of Body Parts in the Global South.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Phillips, T. (2018, Feb 27). "Ensuring happier lives": Chinese media defends move to make Xi Jingping all powerful. *The Guardian.* Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/27/ensuring-happer-lives-chinese-media-defends-move-to-make-xi-jinping-all-powerful

Pun, N. (2005). *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace.* Hong Kong.

Raphals, L. (2013). Alterity and alien contact in Lao She's Martian dystopia, *Cat Country. Science Fiction Studies*, 40(1), 73-85.

Rapoza, K. (2017, Feb). China's aging population becoming more of a problem. Forbes, Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/sites/ kenrapo-za/2017/02/21/chinas-aging-population-becoming-more-of-a-problem/#5bbd7034140f

Roberts, A. (2016) *The History of Science Fiction.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Roberts, A. (2000). *Science Fiction*. London: Routledge.

Schulz, Y. (2018). Plastic China: beyond waste imports. In Franceschini, E& Loubere, N & Lin, K& Nesossi, E & Pia, A & Sorace, C (Eds). *Dog Years: Made In China Yearbook*, 276. ANU Press.

Shakespear, Tom. (2017). The social model of disability. In Davis, L (Ed). *The Disability Studies Reader, 195.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Suvin. D. (1979). *Metamorphoses of science fiction: on the poetics and history of a liteary genre.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 8-9.

Song, M. (2013). Variations on utopia in contemporary Chinese science fiction. *Science Fiction Studies*, 40(1), 86-102.

Sontag, S. (1982). *A Susan Sontag reader.* New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Tkacheva, O &Schwartz, L. H. & Libicki, M.C &Taylor, J.E.& Martini, J &Baxter, C. (2013). Introduction. *Internet Freedom and Political Space*, 10. RAND Corporation.

Veg, S. (2007). Utopian fiction and critical examination: the Cultural Revolution in Wang Xiaobo's "The Golden Age." *China Perspectives,* 4 (72), 75-87.

Wang, J. (2012, Winter). From the Technique for Creating Humans to the Art of Reprogramming Hearts: Scientists, Writers, and the Genesis of China's Modern Literary Vision. *Cultural Critique,* 80, 131-150.

Wagner, Rudolf G. (1985). Lobby literature: the archeology and present functions of science fiction in the People's Republic of China. In Kinkley, J (Ed). *After Mao: Chinese Literature and Society, 1978-1981, 17-61.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Wilkinson, S. (2004). *Bodies for Sale: Ethics and Exploitation in the Human Body Trade*. London: Routledge.

Wright, Melissa W. (2006). *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Xia, J. (2012). A Hundred Ghosts Parade Tonight (K. Liu Trans.). In K. Liu (Ed). I*nvisible Planets: 13 Visions of the Future* [Kindle DX version]. Retrieved from Amazon.com

Xinhua. (2016). Chinese Dream is a Dream for All.

Subversive Texts, continued

References (cont.)

Qiushi. Organ of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. Retrieved from http://english.qstheory.cn/2016-12/04/c_1120047779.htm

Xue, H. (2008). Local Strategies of Labor Control: a Case Study of Three Electronics Factories in China. *International Labor and Working Class History,* No. 73, *Labor in a Changing China* (Spring,2008), 85-103. Cambridge University Press.

Yan, W. (2013). "Great Wall Planet": introducing Chinese science fiction. Translated by Wang Pengfei and Ryan Nichols. *Science Fiction Studies. 40(1), 1-14*.

Ye, Y. (2011). *Zhongguo Kehuan Xiaoshuo de Dichao jiqi Yuanyin* [The low tide of Chinese science fiction and its reasons]. In Q, Wang (Ed). *Xiandai Zhongguo Kehuan Wenxue Zhuchao*, 401-404. Chongqin: Chongqin Publishing Group.

Yin, Y. (2018). The Three-Book problem: why Chinese Sci-Fi still struggles. *Sixth Tone*. Retrieved from https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1002589/the-three-book-problem-why-chinese-sci-fi-still-struggles.

Zhang, Y. (2017). "It felt like you were at war": state of exception and wounded life in the Shanghai Expo-induced domicide. In K, Brickell & M, Fernández & A. A, Vasudevan (Eds.). *Geographies of Forced Eviction Dispossession, Violence, Resistance* (97-119). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Zheng, Y. (2012). Anger, political consciousness, anxiety, and uncertainty. *Asian Survey,* 52(1), 28-41. University of California Press.

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2019
ISSN 2472-0837

Anti-psychiatry and disability in *Flowers for Algernon* and *Clans of the Alphane Moon*

Rob Mayo, University of Bristol, UK

Abstract: *Clans of the Alphane Moon* (1964) by Philip K. Dick and *Flowers for Algernon* (1966) by Daniel Keyes are contemporaneous with the anti-psychiatry movement of the 1960s. As each novel depicts mentally disordered and/or intellectually disabled characters coming into conflict with the psychiatric institutions which define their conditions and administer their lives, they may both be considered examples of literary anti-psychiatry, akin to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by (1962) Ken Kesey.

This essay places both novels in context, not only of contemporaneous anti-psychiatry theorists but also of J. G. Ballard's concept of 'inner space'. Through this critical prism, the essay explores the novels' relation to present-day concerns of disability studies. The essay demonstrates many shortcomings of Dick's work, especially regarding his novel's depiction of mental illness and treatment of its female characters. However, while *Flowers for Algernon* is the superior novel in almost every other consideration, *Clans for Algernon* creates a conceptually fascinating and radically transgressive 'inner space' which surpasses Keyes' ultimately more conservative work.

Keywords: Anti-psychiatry; Daniel Keyes; Disability; Inner space; Philip K. Dick.

> *They were laughing at him because he was retarded.*
> *And at first I had been amused along with the rest.*
> *Suddenly, I was furious at myself and all those who were smirking at him. I wanted to pick up the dishes and throw them. I wanted to smash their laughing faces. I jumped up and shouted: "Shut up! Leave him alone! He can't understand. He can't help what he is... but for God's sake, have some respect! He's a human being!"' (Keyes, 1966, p. 138)*

Charlie Gordon's tirade against the callous patrons of a diner in *Flowers for Algernon* is unsubtle but emphatic. The "Algernon" of the novel's title is a laboratory mouse which has undergone the same intelligence-boosting medical procedure as Charlie, "the novel's [formerly] intellectually-disabled narrator-protagonist," and the experience of de-humanisation is repeatedly demonstrated in the novel via parallels between Charlie and his murine precursor (Sklar, 2013, p. 47). Similarly, *Clans of the Alphane Moon* by Philip K. Dick depicts the dominant "sane" members of society and the marginalised "sick" coming into conceptual and verbal (and eventually quite literal) conflict. Both novels predate the emergence of disability studies as an academic discipline, but the shared themes of disenfranchisement and the distorting effect of social consensus echo across the field, particularly in the famous declaration by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) that 'it is society which disables [us]. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society' (1975). *Flowers for Algernon* and *Clans of the Alphane Moon*, of course, diverge from the UPIAS in their focus on mental impairment instead of somatic conditions—Charlie Gordon is intellectually disabled, while *Clans of the Alphane Moon* depicts a range of mental disorders including schizophrenia and depression—but the notion of disability as a flawed understanding of impairment which is imposed on the impaired by the unimpaired is clearly evident in these earlier texts. This essay explores the mental landscapes of each novel and how they resist or conform to conventional understandings of psychiatric disorder/disability.

The more immediate theoretical context for these novels is not disability studies but anti-psychiatry, a global intellectual turn by disparate thinkers like

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2019
ISSN 2472-0837

Michel Foucault, R. D. Laing, and Thomas Szasz towards critiquing the practices and principles of contemporary psychiatric theory. Although I have chosen the word "turn" over "movement" to describe this grouping of thinkers, there is some remarkable continuity to their work despite an absence of professional interaction or official association, or even mere compatriotism. I am therefore content to continue to use the term "anti-psychiatry"—popularly attributed to David Cooper—as a serviceable shorthand for the points of convergence in thought, which I demonstrate and connect to the later disability studies movement in the first section of this essay. The second section makes the case for *Flowers for Algernon* and *Clans of the Alphane Moon* as instances of literary anti-psychiatry (akin to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the 1962 novel by Ken Kesey which, in concert with the 1975 film adaptation by Miloš Forman, is probably the most celebrated example of anti-psychiatric fiction). I acknowledge that although it is dated by some aspects of its language, *Flowers for Algernon* is far more consonant with contemporary disability studies in the era of social justice and the #MeToo movement than *Clans of the Alphane Moon* is, and it is perhaps reassuring to note that *Flowers for Algernon* has remained a popular novel among both SF fans and the wider community since its publication, while the significantly more problematic *Clans of the Alphane Moon* has not achieved anything like the level of visibility that other novels by Dick such as *The Man in the High Castle* or *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* have enjoyed.

However, while it is important to acknowledge the many ways in which Dick's novel runs counter to progressive thought, particularly on the issues of feminism and mental illness, I demonstrate in the final part of this essay that *Clans of the Alphane Moon* may be considered to be more continuous with the revolutionary impulse of contemporaneous anti-psychiatry than *Flowers for Algernon*. It is hoped that this essay further demonstrates that while these novels both predate the emergence of disability studies as an academic discipline and may, to varying degrees, remain problematic for many contemporary readers, their depictions of impaired characters resisting their society's psychiatric institutions' conceptualisation and treatment of them warrants their consideration as objects of disability study.

"The Alphanes will guarantee the civil liberties of the clans. No hospitalisation. No therapy." (Dick, 1964, p. 190)

Although anti-psychiatry was an international phenomenon with major voices from various countries—particularly in Italy, where the work of Franco Basaglia resulted in reform in national policy—it is regrettably necessary here to narrow the field by taking a smaller sample of thinkers. The texts which primarily inform the understanding of anti-psychiatry adopted here are *The Divided Self* by R. D. Laing, *Asylums* by Erving Goffman, *The Myth of Mental Illness* by Thomas Szasz, and *Madness and Civilization* by Michel Foucault. My concern here is not with these authors' insights into specific medical conditions such as hysteria or schizophrenia, but in their more general consideration of the psychiatric institution(s) which manifest the prevailing contemporaneous thought. There are two main threads of anti-psychiatric theory that I want to draw from these works, the first of which is the idea of the physical institution. Foucault (1961) begins his history of madness with images of the ship of fools and leprosariums which, through the Renaissance to the 20th century, evolve into mental asylums, changing form but consistently reflecting the impulse to segregate those considered "mad" and keep them apart from the "sane" (pp. 3–13). Goffman (1961) describes asylums as "total institutions," which "disrupt or defile precisely those actions that in civil society have the role of attesting [...] that [the inmate] is a person with "adult" self-determination, autonomy, and freedom of action" (p. 43). We might readily term the process which Goffman (1961) describes 'dehumanisation', since it appears to deprive its subjects of essential human rights, but Goffman instead names this process "mortification" (p. 43), suggesting that the in-

mates of psychiatric institutions are dehumanised to the extent that they are figuratively murdered. One might hope that a process of depersonalisation might be undone—via some rehabilitative process which might well be named "repersonalisation"—but Goffman's terminology suggests that the effects of the psychiatric institution on the "mad" are so thoroughgoing that the subject is not only no longer a human being but essentially no longer even a being at all.

Secondly, the language of psychotherapy carries out a conceptual estrangement and isolation, identified by Laing and Szasz as well as by Foucault, wherein "the words one has to use are specifically designed to isolate" (Laing, 1960, p. 18). On this point Foucault (1961) may be seen to share Goffman's apparently bleak view of the potential for reform, as he states in his introduction to *Madness and Civilization* that "modern man no longer communicates with the madman [...] As for a common language, there is no such thing; or rather, there is no such thing any longer" (p. x). In the conversation between mad and sane "the madman" has been silenced by the death of his language, and "[t]he language of psychiatry" is, therefore "a monologue of reason about madness, [which] has been established only on the basis of such a silence" (Foucault, 1961, p. xi). Although Foucault states elsewhere that the purpose of his historical investigation of concepts is to demonstrate that they are contingent and therefore mutable, this first major example of Foucault's "archaeological" method suggests that psychiatrists and their patients are fated to come into verbal-conceptual conflict indefinitely. Laing (1960) is significantly more optimistic on this point, with much of *The Divided Self* devoted to espousing Laing's concept of "existential phenomenology" as a method by which "to articulate what the other's 'world' is and his way of being in it" (p. 25). Although the sensationalist title of Szasz's work has proven predictably and perennially controversial, its subtitle—*Foundations of a Theory of Personal Conduct*—demonstrates Szasz's commitment to offering a reformative alternative to the targets of his critique. Szasz (1961) suggests that mental disorder and resulting distress are 'more akin to the problem of a person speaking a foreign tongue than it is to that of a person having a bodily disease' (p. 11), but does not suggest as Foucault does that the foreign tongue in this analogy is a dead one. Szasz (1961) furthermore contrasts psychiatry with other disciplines, and states that "[e]ntity-thinking has always preceded process-thinking. Physics, chemistry, and certain branches of biology have long ago supplemented substantive conceptualisations by process-theories. Psychiatry has not" (p. 1). In Szasz's view psychiatry has not yet experienced a conceptual revolution which has occurred naturally in all other disciplines, and the language of contemporaneous psychiatry applies a false veneer of scientific detachment which actually undermines any potential therapeutic benefit to the patient; it is possible, Szasz seems to suggest, that once psychiatry undergoes an overdue but possibly inevitable conceptual reconfiguration this linguistic problem may be resolved.

Neither this essay nor the objects of its study are strictly works of psychiatric history—the questions of whether psychiatric reform is possible, or to what extent it may have already occurred, are apposite but not fundamental. The focus here is instead on how *Flowers for Algernon* and C*lans of the Alphane Moon* demonstrate a shared concern with these theorists, about the ways in which the relationship between the disabled and/or disordered subjects and the psychiatric institutions which administer their lives is frequently antagonistic rather than therapeutic. Lennard J. Davis (2017) states that the dominant concept of "normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person" (p.1), and the eponymous clans of Dick's novel and Keyes's Charlie Gordon both reflect the dissonance and distress arising from contemporary psychiatry's hegemonic concept of psychological "normalcy" or mental health.

"No talk of rehabilitation [...] of hope." (Keyes, 1966, p. 161)

Anti-psychiatry and disability, continued

Both *Clans of the Alphane Moon* and *Flowers for Algernon* are fundamentally emblematic of this central tenet of anti-psychiatry, by virtue of their depictions of conflict between the psychiatric institution and its patients, and the failure of psychiatry to alleviate those patients' distress through or in spite of that conflict. This failure is most vividly presented in *Clans of the Alphane Moon*, which has as its premise a society formed by the patients of a mental hospital after the eponymous moon is abandoned by human settlers. The society is divided into castes according to diagnosis, and its members are segregated into towns which are named after historic figures which supposedly embody those conditions, such as the paranoid "Adolfville" and the manic "Da Vinci Heights" (Dick, 1964, pp. 1, 8). The society that quite literally emerges from the asylum destroys it and refers to the ruined building as a "concentration camp" in conversation with a psychiatrist from Earth who plans to return the population to "enforced hospitalization" (Dick, 1964, pp. 85, 144). Although the physical manifestation of psychiatry on the colony is symbolically destroyed, the linguistic isolation and estrangement are still evident in these dialogues. The psychiatrist, Mary Rittersdorf, insists that the "concentration camp" is a "legitimate hospital," but the rationale for her mission is ironically undermined: she claims that the Alphane society requires intervention on the grounds that "Total isolation [is] the ultimate effect of their entire group activity," but her solution to this is hospitalization—'"in other words," as another character points out, "captivity" (Dick, 1964, pp. 84–5, 144). Her perverse solution to a society that has allegedly encaged itself is, as her colleague points out, to place it in a smaller cage. The notion of linguistic dissonance between patient and psychiatrist is also comically demonstrated in an exchange between Mary and Howard Straw, the diplomatic representative of the 'Mans' (the manic caste), who mishears her reference to "assorted patterns of mental illness" as "sordid" and responds to the perceived slight with brief but "dire rage" (Dick, 1964, p. 146). The novel also frequently highlights similarities between Mary and the manic patients that she comes into conflict with, and ironically she becomes an immensely destructive force once warfare breaks out between the clans and the invaders that she represents. With heavy-handed irony typical of the novel, Dick depicts Mary judgmentally berating the clans for being "out of their minds," even after she herself has "fired at Chuck [Rittersdorf, her estranged husband]" and "killed [a manic caste] soldier as he fled back to his tank" (1964, 182).

Flowers for Algernon, the later of the two novels, lacks the pyrotechnic visual metaphors and action of *Clans*, but shares with it a skeptical view of the psychiatric institution. Its premise is that a neurosurgical technique is developed which enables an intellectually disabled patient to rapidly become a genius whose intellect surpasses his doctors'. However, this being a work of literary anti-psychiatry, the change is temporary and the first-person narration charts both Charlie Gordon's meteoric intellectual evolution and his inevitable decline; the moral seems to be that Charlie would have been spared unnecessary suffering if he had remained ignorant of his affliction and its potential cure. In an echo of *Clans of the Alphane Moon* there is a symbolic misunderstanding between doctor and patient—in this case, Charlie writes in his diary about the "raw shok test," which he later discovers to be the famous Rorschach inkblot test (Keyes, 1966, p. 2; italics original). Keyes develops this further than Dick does and shows Charlie's anger when he takes the test again after the operation and belatedly realises that images are meant to be suggested to him by the shape of the inkblots, rather than literally hidden somewhere in or beneath the ink (Keyes, 1966, pp. 39–41). His doctors assure him that they use the same wording to describe the test each time it's administered, but clearly this isn't a viable language for communicating with Charlie until they've raised his intellect. This recalls Szasz's suggestion that psychiatry is essentially a linguistic problem, and if the analogy is applied to *Flowers for Algernon,* then Charlie's doctors have solved

the communication problem by simply forcing their patient to speak their own language.

This linguistic barrier between patient and doctor is a recurring theme in the first part of the novel, in which Charlie's understanding of psychiatry changes as his intellect rapidly grows. For example, Charlie's doctor's notes are written in an obscure code—'WF + ADdF-Ad orig. WF – A SF + obj' —which is presumably a practical shorthand for them, but has the effect of further isolating Charlie from his treatment (Keyes, 1966, p. 41). In another scene, earlier in the treatment, Keyes (1966) depicts the communicative barrier between Charlie and his doctors vividly when Charlie's attempts to recall his doctors' words, which are peppered with lacunae: "most people of his low ment** are host** and uncoop** they are usually dull and apathet*" (p. 7). Although the idea that Charlie remembers the first three syllables of "apathetic" and not the last one, yet remembers "contribyushun [sic]" on the very next page, does not withstand much imaginative scrutiny, Keyes's creative typography vividly depicts the doctors' failures to communicate clearly with their patient. Later, when Charlie has been transformed into a superhuman genius by his doctors' experimental surgical techniques, Keyes presents Charlie's enlightened perspective on the physical institution that he anticipates living in once his intellect declines so much that he can no longer look after himself. The Warren State Home fares far better in Keyes's (1966) fictional world than the Alphane asylum does in Dick's, and it is slightly more sympathetically presented as a "deep freeze" (p. 153) for its inmates rather than a concentration camp. The head psychologist there is nevertheless compelled to clarify that the home "isn't a prison," despite the fact that there is no fence around the grounds. The psychologist in this scene would attest that this is evidence of how few of his patients are capable of living outside of the home, but an anti-psychiatric reading—which the novel consistently encourages via Charlie's ironic scrutiny of his doctors and the broader psychiatric institution in which they operate—may instead interpret this as evidence of the power of the institution as a concept, which keeps inmates "shut out from every human experience" (Keyes, 1966, p. 160) even without physical walls to literally impede them.

"I used to think I was so [...] completely different from my patients. They were sick and I wasn't." (Dick, 1964, p. 221)

There is a clear sympathy, then, between Keyes' novel and Goffman's critique of the depersonalisation of inmates in asylums. Charlie repeatedly laments that his doctors view him more as a means of professional advancement than as a human being, and when he sees another man with an intellectual disability being mocked by the patrons of a diner, he launches into the passionate tirade against their belittling treatment of him, quoted at the start of this essay. Its not particularly subtle writing and the novel's use of the word "retarded" (Keyes, 1966, p. 138) certainly dates it, but *Flowers for Algernon* arguably transcends the generic conventions of SF in a way that *Clans of the Alphane Moon* does not. *Flowers for Algernon* provides a poignant character-study of tragedy and regret that it simply would not be capable of without its speculative premise. *Clans of the Alphane Moon*, in contrast, features a lot of the genre tropes that put off SF-sceptics—such as aliens, spaceships, and rayguns—and it does not often employ them for any clear purpose. It is, in the pejorative sense, a far more generic SF novel than *Flowers for Algernon*. For example, Dick's novel features a character with the powerful ability to "make time flow backward" (1964, p. 37), whose introduction one might reasonably suspect to foreshadow an instance of timeline-erasure and revision in the novel's explosive climax. Dick, however, defies Anton Chekhov's famous dictum that "[o]ne must never place a loaded rifle on the stage if it isn't going to go off," and although the character is briefly mentioned in the novel's resolution, it is only in reference to her capacity for spying on Chuck Rittersdorf, and not to related to the manipulation of time. The novel add-

-itionally suffers from the career-long problem of Dick's prose, of which Jonathan Lethem (2005) says that "[h]is sentences routinely fall down and cry 'ouch'" (p. 78). Dick's oeuvre in general also displays a continuous problem of a dehumanising view of female characters, which is particularly pronounced in *Clans of the Alphane Moon.* All of the novel's female characters are presented as potential sexual conquests for the male narrators; most are introduced with those narrators' assessments of their breasts; and one is described with the particularly grotesque phrase, "well-formed gynecologic apparatus" (Dick, 1964, p. 143). In keeping with this dated and uncomfortable aspect of Dick's fiction, the depictions of mental illness in *Clans of the Alphane Moon* are also caricaturistic and problematic—far more so than Keyes's dated terminology. Gabriel Baines, the diplomatic representative of the paranoid caste, is—in addition to a thoroughgoing chauvinist—conniving and manipulative. The manic caste members are simply aggressive and ill-tempered, and the industrial output of their settlement is far more focused on military production than are the works of its namesake polymath, Leonardo Da Vinci. The depressive delegate, Dino Watters, is dour and pessimistic, and Baines complains that '[i]t's [Watters's] own fault he's the way he is; he could change if he wanted. He could believe good things if he made the effort' (Dick, 1964, p. 6). Although this utterance is of course characteristic of the novel in its dramatic irony, Dick does little to deconstruct these dismissive stereotypes or to offer any more sympathetic alternatives.

However, while it is imperative to acknowledge and address Dick's failings, particularly in a contemporary intellectual climate benefiting from both World Mental Health Day and the more recent #MeToo movement, it is also important to highlight aspects of the novel which succeed in spite of itself. I therefore wish to demonstrate in this last part of the essay that *Clans of the Alphane Moon* is, from a certain perspective, radical and innovative and consistent with the reformative impulse of the contemporaneous anti-psychiatry turn. Although *Flowers for Algernon* is undoubtedly a more persuasive and successful work of fiction, it cannot compete with *Clans of the Alphane Moon* in this particular critical consideration, and in order to demonstrate the basis of this approach, a scene from Keyes's novel is instructive. In it, Charlie's two primary doctors, the psychiatrists Professor Nemur and Dr. Strauss, debate their understandings of the concept of an intelligence quotient (IQ). Nemur, who is often in conflict with Charlie and clearly views his patient more as a means of professional advancement than as a charge in need of care, expresses the common idea that IQ is simply a measurement of intelligence—"like a scale in a drugstore weighs pounds" (Keyes, 1966, p. 35). Strauss, the more sympathetic of Charlie's two doctors, argues instead that IQ is a measurement of one's capacity for intelligence, and that the quotient is more akin to "the numbers on the outside of a measuring jug" (Keyes, 1966, p. 35). This image suggests a conceptual evolution from a two-dimensional, linear measure to a three-dimensional or "spatial" understanding of the human mind.

This scene, therefore, calls to mind the term "inner space," coined by Dick's and Keyes's contemporary J. G. Ballard in his 1963 essay "Time, Memory, and Inner Space." The more widely-cited formulation of Ballard's concept appears in a 1968 interview, in which Ballard "define[s] Inner Space as an imaginary realm in which on the one hand the outer world of reality, and on the other the inner the inner world of the mind meet and merge [e.g.] in the landscapes of the surrealist painters' (p. 106). Unfortunately, for all of the novel's many other merits, this concept is only briefly suggested in the above-quoted scene in *Flowers for Algernon*. Instead, the conceptualisation and depiction of the human mind in the novel might fairly be described as otherwise resolutely two-dimensional. Charlie's eventual mental decline is reflected in the written qualities of his first-person narration, like a mirror image of his miraculous development at the start of

the novel. The narrative describes (in the mathematical sense) a literal arc—Charlie's intelligence increases over time and then declines back again on a similar trajectory. One might imagine this arc plotted onto a graph, with the axes measuring the two central components of the story: intelligence and the passage of time. The SF conceit of the story offers a kind of fluidity between levels of intelligence that isn't available in the real world, but Charlie's existence is nevertheless consistently defined in relation to the two poles of superhuman intelligence and mental degeneracy; indeed, Charlie rhetorically asks 'Who is better equipped [to complete the psychiatric study]? Who else has lived in both worlds?' (Keyes, 1966, p. 139), presenting his lived experience as a binary rather than a scale or spectrum. Keyes offers no prospect for Charlie's recovery, and the narrative arc that continues beyond the novel's last page is without doubt further mental decline, imminent institutionalisation, and Charlie's eventual death in the Warren State Home. Howard Sklar (2013) critiques the depiction of Charlie at the start and end of the novel as conforming to "a staple of the stereotypical representation of people with intellectual disabilities," and the recurrence of Charlie's disability, therefore, represents a return to conventional understandings (p. 57). Contrary to the reformative impulse of anti-psychiatry thinkers, then, *Flowers for Algernon* not only "consolidates and reinforces conventions of dystopian SF," but also the psychiatric institution which Charlie's transformation briefly disturbs (Sklar, 2013, p. 48).

The stereotypes of mental disorder presented in Dick's novel are generally irredeemable, and Sandra Newman's (2014) description of the novel as "ridiculous" and "offensive" is largely inarguable. However, Dick's dated caricatures are contained within a fictional social space which remains conceptually fascinating, in spite of the worst aspects of his writing. Contrary to what one might initially expect given the grouping and segregation of people in different cities based on their diagnoses, fluidity is shown to be fundamental to Alphane society. It is stated that newborns on the moon are "classified as polymorphous schizophrenic until proved otherwise"; children are "differentiated" at the age of ten, unless no clear symptoms of other disorders appear in which case they are considered "Polys" (Dick, 1964, pp. 5, 213) by essential disposition rather than by default. This is not a definitive classification, however, and the diplomatic representative of the Poly people, Annette Golding, reflects that "theoretically, being a Poly, [she] could become [a Mans]. In fact [she] could become anything" (Dick, 1964, p. 160). Chuck Rittersdorf, therefore, hopes that the clans' conflation of polymorphous schizophrenia with natural mental health means that the established Poly clan might actually contain "[p]eople who work their way out of their derangements and possibly children who never developed them" (Dick, 1964, p. 213).

One of the hebephrenic characters—a docile people described by Baines as "silly" but demonstrating "some virtue in simplicity"—is shown living in Gandhitown with a wife who seems uncharacteristically aggressive for a hebephrenic:

> "I not only have to live with a Heeb – I live with one who has visions, like a Skitz. Are you a Heeb or a Skitz? […] Make up your mind […] And you're as irritable as a Mans […]" she yelled at him in fury. (Dick, 1964, pp. 3, 66)

It is belatedly revealed that Elsie "had been a Mans for several years and she still retained the arrogant hostility learned at Da Vinci Heights" (Dick, 1964, p. 73), but has now actively chosen to live as a hebephrenic. Such an act of self-determination in defiance of the diagnosis assigned to her as a child would presumably be resisted by Mary Rittersdorf and the contemporary psychiatric institution which she represents, but Elsie's husband Ignatz approvingly observes that she is "well on her way to becoming a Heeb" (Dick, 1964, p. 69). Elsie's depiction is, like so many other characters' in the novel, problematic, and she is not so much a convincing

demonstration of the mutability of self-conception as a crude amalgam of two offensive stereotypes of mental illness. However, while the glimpses of fluidity which Dick provides while exploring this segregated society are certainly exceptions rather than rules, they become of profound importance at the novel's conclusion.

Lennard J. Davis proposes a historicisation of disability studies which "rethink[s] our assumptions about the universality of the concept of the norm" and recognises that it "enters European culture, or at least the European languages, only in the nineteenth century" (2017, p. 2). "To understand the disabled body," he states, "one must return to the concept of the norm, the normal body" (Davis, 2017, p. 1). We may, in turn, apply the same logic to mental disability and/or disorder, and their relation to the "normal" or "sane" mind, and see that while we have various definitions of mental illness—such as those provided by the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, or the World Health Organization's *International Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders*—definitions of mental wellbeing are less evident. The 'norm'—be it in terms of mental or physical ability, race, sexuality, or any other aspect of human identity—often enjoys a form of critical immunity via invisibility; so pervasive is the concept of the norm that the "normal" human—cisgender male, heterosexual, Caucasian, non-disabled and neurotypical—is taken as a given rather than being critiqued and rigorously

defined.

It is significant, then, that Chuck Rittersdorf decides at the conclusion of *Clans of the Alphane Moon* to remain on the titular satellite and found 'the Norm settlement':

> "That will be Thomas Jeffersonburg [...] So far containing only one person, but with great anticipations for the future."
>
> [...]
>
> "You're an absolute fool", Howard Straw said disparagingly. "Nobody'll ever show up and live with you in your settlement [...] six weeks from now you'll be out of your mind; you'll be ready for every other settlement on the moon, except of course this one."
>
> "Maybe so." Chuck nodded. But he was not so positive as Straw. He was thinking once more of Annette Golding, for one [...] He would wait it out. For however much time it took. And he would get help in building his settlement; already he had established what appeared to be a solid working relationship with the Pare rep, Gabriel Baines, and that portended some thing. (Dick, 1964, pp. 217-18)

The decision to found his own settlement may be ironically colonialist, given the efforts to which Chuck goes earlier in the novel to avert the military invasion which his wife spearheads. To understand Chuck's cautious optimism in the face of his new compatriot's dismissive pessimism, it is important to place this scene in the context of the novel's overarching plot. The official motive for Mary Rittersdorf's diplomatic mission is the feared "consequences to us [i.e. civilisation on Earth] of a mentally deranged social enclave" which might develop "a paranoiac nationalist state-concept [or] barbaric destructiveness of a manic sort" (Dick, 1964, p. 32). There is of course heavy irony in this scene, with both named threats being familiar to Dick's earth-bound readers from the Second World War and the contemporary Vietnam War. Implicit in Mary's employers' statement is the assumption that Terran civilisation is essentially sane, normal, and that the Alphane moon and its unfamiliar society are Earth's monstrous, threatening "Other." The novel's climactic conclusion, therefore, depicts the norm of mental wellbeing, no longer divided by the asylum walls, coming into a traumatic and pyrotechnic conflict with its Other which reconfigures the definitions of each.

Since Mary ironically comes to embody that "barbaric destructiveness" (Dick, 1964, p. 32) in her actions on the moon, it is expected by all of the novel's characters that she will settle with the manics once she is stranded there. Perversely, she is instead diagnosed via "a full spectrum of psychological profile tests" with depression, and she resignedly prepares to live in the "endless dark gloom" (Dick, 1964, pp. 207, 215) of Cotton Mather Estates. Chuck—despite first being introduced at the start of the novel contemplating suicide—is instead diagnosed as sane, apparently the first of his kind on the moon and therefore alien to the established settlements, unless he were to "choose" a mental disorder and adopt the customs of that clan, as Elsie does. Chuck's decision to found his own settlement may be read as a reversion to conventional psychiatric theory, a symbol of conceptual and literal barriers set up between the sick and the sane. However, Chuck anticipates that "he would get help in building his settlement" from members of existing clans who might eventually join him there, and he promises to travel from his own settlement to the depressives (Dick, 1964, p. 218) in order to visit Mary. This demonstrates firstly, Chuck's belief in the fluidity of the Alphane society, and his endorsement of Baines's assertion that "if we can work together we are not sick" (Dick, 1964, p. 145); the functioning society on the moon embodies mental disorder as a handicap which entails cooperation rather than a disability which prohibits it. Secondly, the founding of Thomas Jeffersonburg does not represent the resurrection of conventional psychiatric theory and the (literal or figurative) asylum walls, but instead suggests that normalcy is constantly under construction, "started out but never finished" like the "hodgepodge of incomplete [...] projects" (Dick, 1964, p. 9) at Da Vinci Heights. The destruction of the asylum walls before the start of the novel allows the inmates and the "norms" to meet, revealing that their fluid identities are the result of symbiotic relation. It is finally in this reconstructed space that Chuck and Mary are able to decide to resume their relationship, despite mutual infidelity and attempts to murder each other over the course of the novel, and they conclude that "there's not that much difference" (Dick, 1964, p. 221) between their mental states.

> **"All the barriers were gone. I had [...] found my way out of the labyrinth." (Keyes, 1966, p. 204)**

To read these two novels as instances of literary anti-psychiatry—SF bedfellows to Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962)—is to situate them in the context of ideas being explored by a wide variety of contemporaneous thinkers from around the world, and is clearly reflected in both novels' ironic scrutiny of the authority of the psychiatric institution. Although contemporary disability theory attends more to physical impairment than mental disorder, it is nevertheless a valuable lens through which to view these works. Charlie Gordon's passionate defense of his fellow intellectually-disabled "human being[s]" (Keyes, 1966, p. 138) is a clear tirade against the ableist "norms" of society, while Chuck and Mary Rittersdor's integration into liberated Alphane society seems to prove Gabriel Baines's point that "[they] are not sick" (Dick, 1964, p. 145) or disabled. The first-person narrative of *Flowers for Algernon* traces Charlie's meteoric intellectual development as the beneficiary of psychiatric medicine and, with effective pathos, his inevitable return to intellectual disability as he discovers the shortcomings of his doctors' work. While Keyes's novel makes a powerful emotional appeal, rendering Charlie a far more sympathetic and memorable character than anyone in *Clans of the Alphane Moon,* it also appeals to dated conventions of representations of disability (Sklar, 2013, p. 57). Contrary to Charlie's claim to having transcended the "labyrinth"—an image which recalls the mazes which he and his doctors set for Algernon as medical tests—the narrative of the novel presents only a temporary disruption of conventional psychiatric theory.

In contrast, *Clans of the Alphane Moon* provides a fascinating early example of the Ballardian con-

Anti-psychiatry and disability, continued

cept of "inner space," wherein "the outer world of reality [and] the inner world of the mind meet and merge" (Ballard, 1968, p. 106). Unlike more famous examples such as *The Dream Master* (1966) by Roger Zelazny, *Mindplayers* (1987) by Pat Cadigan, or Christopher Nolan's 2010 blockbuster SF-action film *Inception*, Dick's version of inner space fiction does not revolve around the premise of "dream hacking." While these later creators' works craft fantastical physical realms which symbolically represent characters' minds, Dick's novel presents a landscape which is, within the novel's fictional premise, uniformly real; unlike some of his more famous novels such as T*he Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1965) or *Ubik* (1969), there is no suggestion that any character's experience in the novel is a fabrication or hallucination.

Instead, *Clans of the Alphane Moon* qualifies as inner space fiction due to the influence on the landscape of its inhabitants' minds. The spaces shaped by the disordered minds of the Alphane clans are, like the characterisations of their diplomatic delegates, problematic and potentially uncomfortable for present-day readers, from the paranoid city, Adolfville ("the most solidly-built, sturdy and enduring urban area anywhere"), to "the incredibly degrading hovels of the [hebephrenics]" (Dick, 1964, p. 1) in Gandhitown. However, the reconfiguration of Alphane society prompted by the arrival of "Norms" from Earth results in a world in which the former asylum inmates and their new neighbours live holistically, and in which one may freely move between the mental states manifested by these districts. Charlie Gordon, on the other hand, exists in only two "worlds"— one more than anyone else in *Flowers for Algernon*, of course, but his sublime transformation is short-lived and he is soon restored to his initial intellectual disability and "shut out from every human experience" (Keyes, 1966, p. 160) by the literal and figurative walls of the Warren State Home. While Charlie begins and ends his narrative encaged by the psychiatric institution's conceptualisation of his disorder, Chuck Rittersdorf embraces and codifies the radical openness of the Alphane (mental) landscape.

Anti-psychiatry and disability, continued

References

Ballard, J. G. (1968). Interview with J. G. Ballard (Dan O'Hara, Trans.). *Munich Round Up*, 100, 104–6.

Cooper, David (1967). *Psychiatry and Anti-Psychiatry*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2001; repr. 2013.

Davis, Lennard J. (2017). Introduction: Disability, Normality, and Power. In Davis (Ed.) *The Disability Studies Reader: Fifth Edition*, 1-14. New York, NY.

Dick, Philip K. (1964). *Clans of the Alphane Moon.* New York, NY, Mariner Books, 2013.

Foucault, Michel (1961). *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (Richard Howard, Trans.). New York, NY, Vintage Books, 1988.

Goffman, Erving (1961). *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates.* New York, NY, Anchor Books.

Keyes, Daniel (1966). *Flowers for Algernon.* London, Gollancz, 2002.

Laing, R. D. (1960). *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness.* London, Penguin, 2010.

Lethem, Jonathan (2005). You Don't Know Dick. In *The Disappointment Artist and Other Essays*. London: Faber and Faber, 77–83.

Newman, Sandra (2014). Rambling, offensive – and unbeatable: beam me up, old-school sci-fi. *The Guardian.* Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2014/jun/17/old-school-sci-fi-sandra-newman>

Sklar, Howard (2013). The Many Voices of Charlie Gordon: On the Representation of Intellectual Disability in Daniel Keyes's *Flowers for Algernon.* In Kathryn Allan (Ed.) *Disability in Science Fiction: Representations of Technology as Cure* (pp. 47-59). New York, NY, Palgrave Macmillan.

Szasz, Thomas (1961). *The Myth of Mental Illness: Foundations of a Theory of Personal Conduct*. New York, NY, Hoeber-Harper.

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2019
ISSN 2472-0837

The Future is Scar-y:
The Connective Tissue of Emotion, Body, & Identity

Michael Stokes, Michigan State University

Abstract: This paper brings conversations around coalition work between communities of trans people and disabled people into the greater scope of popular culture. Drawing on theories of reboot culture—the practice of updating and remaking past storylines—alongside disability theory, this paper brings together the material and metaphorical elements of cultural conversation. Staying with the historical violence of science fiction, this paper does not move towards restoration or "cure." Instead, attentiveness to the white-, cis-focused practices of the past speculations on the future offers a route to re-code our present moment. I argue that scars offer a place for this conversation. By defying a fixed temporality of injury followed by healing, scars provide a connection where the conversations of non-normative community can take place. An acceptance of the pain and loss from the original runs of sf narratives opens the potentials of new futures that allow these narratives to be reshaped.

Keywords: Popular Culture; Science Fiction; Disability; Gender & Sexuality

At the midpoint of the film *Predestination* (2014), the main character stands in front of a hospital mirror. The character's abdomen and chest show scars of a mastectomy and hysterectomy while the voice-over states, "the person I knew was truly gone" (Spierig, M. and Spierig, P. 42:14). This narration is Jane's, as well as that of every main character of the film. However, as do the short story and the film addressed in this essay, I will refrain from explaining every detail at the start. The hinge on which the story turns is Jane's transition, first into John and later into others. Without consent, surgeons forcibly operated on Jane's body to modify it into one that has a penis after noticing the character's intersex anatomy (genitals which do not adhere to a binary male/female social construct) during a difficult childbirth. In the next scene, the character (years later) describes this experience to the Barkeep, a far future version of the main character who has come to recruit John as a time traveler. The Barkeep remarks: "you seem like a normal man" (43:37). John's reaction to this statement registers somewhere between disbelief and pain: with eyes wide and mouth hanging open, John exhales a small sound of corroboration. The character then retorts scornfully: "more normal than ever now… I found out I'm not shooting blanks anymore" (43:48), referring to a return to gamete production. This "normality" functions as an open wound, rather than the healing scars of the mirror scene, more closely resembling the character's gaping mouth as they corroborate the Barkeep's expectations. From this opening synopsis, this article asks: how does normality function as wounding? What is normality's relationship to bodily scars and identity? How are ideas of normality (dis)figured in cultural reimaginings of futures? And what would a future with disability and trans studies working in coalition look like?

Predestination, directed by Michael and Peter Spierig, is a conflux of ideas in literature, culture, and identity. The film itself is entangled with questions of disabled and trans identity, assemblages of self that make contact with and enter frictive discourse through scarring. Temporally, the 2014 film is engaged with multiple existences: its source text—the 1959 short story "All You Zombies—," its contemporary audience, and the potential futures it may pro-duce. The story itself is temporally unstable: it is a tale of time travel following a single character's birth, transition, self-impregnation, recruitment as a temporal agent, and ultimately, the murder of the character's future self. By questioning the overlaps and divergences of multiple positions in time and culture, this essay returns to an embodied exper-

-ience of scarring to think though its multiple potentialities as both wounding and reparative force. I am particularly invested in scarring's potential as a coalitional tool to engage disabled people and trans people who were cut from many sf texts written around the time that "All You Zombies—" was first released.

This essay centers on the transition of the character/s central to Robert Heinlein's "—All You Zombies—" and its later film adaptation *Predestination* (2014) to address scarring and wounding as possible sites for community formation. Relying upon scholarship drawn from literary studies, disability the intricacies of identity and wounds in an assembled framework which notes the linkages of identity, disability, and science fiction (sf). The essay follows the physical and emotional transitions of the main character/s of the story: marked by injury, scarring, and narrative. The main character's transforming body offers a potential space to discuss the coalitional engagement of disabled people and trans people. As groups that face mutual stigmatization for not fitting the narrow definition of bodily normality, these groups must navigate systems of oppression that act on them in similar fashions.

In recognition of the main character's complex embodiment, I do not use pronouns (except in the case of the plural possessive) when referring to the character in this paper. The character is named, at alternate times, Jane, John, The Unmarried Mother, the Barkeep, and the Fizzle Bomber. The character is born intersex, but the doctor assigns Jane as a "healthy little girl" (Heinlein, 1975 p.227). After this assignment, the character demonstrates dysphoric tendencies (Heinlein, 1975 p.225; Spierig, M. and Spierig, P. 18:46) and does not identify with boys or girls. In both the film and the story, each time the character becomes another iteration of these multiple selves, the event is marked by scarring. This scarring is what sutures the character's understanding of previous incarnations to a new one. Jane's becoming John is marked by surgical scars. John's becoming the Unmarried Mother is marked by physical and psychic scarring that comes from not being able to perform normative masculinity through expected forms of work; he can't "do manual labor—too much scar tissue" (Heinlein, 1975 p.229). The Unmarried Mother becomes the Barkeep as the result of having a new face sutured on over burnt tissue (Spierig, M. and Spierig, P. 02:44). The Barkeep's (potential) becoming the Fizzle Bomber is marked by unseen scars in the brain, which is wounded with each temporal jump (Spierig, M. and Spierig, P. 01:10:12). Through these changes, the story demonstrates for the audience/reader that the connective tissue between these identities is scar tissue. Scar tissue functions at both the physical and metaphorical levels to hold things together as well as to mark the understanding of how they came apart.

What suturing happens when a short story from 1959 becomes a film in 2014? What links the text and the film together? What gets scarred over in the process of adaptation? The answers to these questions approach an understanding of the affective power of SF as a genre to influence and be influenced by changing opinions regarding non-normative bodies and identities. I discuss each of the character's traumatic changes to broaden our understanding of the connection between emotion, body, and identity.

While the film does make some progress by incorporating representations of disabled and trans people, the film *Predestination* continues to elide trans identities through the process of universalization. Rather than addressing the lived experience of disability or transness, the film moves past these specific experiences to use them metaphorically. The main character's transitions are the crux of the story, but it is the changes in the emotional development of the character that offers an affective connection to the audience. This is something that Ethan Hawke, who plays the Barkeep iteration of the main character, praises in an interview following the release of the film: it spoke to his own identity and conflicts of self-creation even though he doesn't identify as trans (Godfrey, 2014). Despite, or perhaps because of this emotional connection,

however, the societal impact of the character's transition is absent from the narrative; the interview with Hawke notes that "although the lead character is transgender, the film is not explicitly about transgender issues, it's about all of us" (Hawke qtd. Godfrey, 2014). While the film focuses broadly on the character's physical scars to convey its ideas about transition, the significance of the character's larger social contextualization is limited to the arc of the story: the scars offer a representation of trans existence, but don't address lived trans experience in contemporary society. The narrative instead positions the character's transitions in line with a fictional and flattened depiction true to Heinlein's original elisions of identity. The makers of *Predestination* express their desire to uphold the 'original' story, as such, in an interview given after the release of the film. Peter Spierig explained that the society in the film "was a version of [Heinlein's] sixties, and we loved the idea of maintaining that" (McWeeny, 2017). Consequently, the social factors relevant to its creation (anti-blackness, ableism, trans-erasure) are retained in the interest of maintaining the story's history.

In the introduction to Robert A. Heinlein's "All You Zombies—" published in the anthology The Mirror of Infinity, Alexei Panshin (1970) discusses the central themes of the story: self and the paradox of time travel (p. 219). He argues that the idea of time travel is not necessarily a scientific fiction, but is instead a philosophical one (p. 220). When viewed this way, the idea of traveling through time offers a potential future and perhaps past for examination and speculation. Time travel comes with sets of paradoxes that are intended as thought exercises: if something has already subjectively happened as the result of a future actor in the past, can that act be changed? Are the events that shape a person's identity… predestined? As such, the story offers both a malleable past and future for analyzing the character of the story as well as the film. Because of the malleability of the subject matter, it lends itself to being twisted and reconfigured in the adaptation between text and film. To that end, it is beneficial to see what room for re-thinking and re-evaluating arises when considering the story in terms of multiple temporal social frameworks.

It is in these frameworks that the potential of sf as a genre of interpretation and speculation on potential futures becomes apparent. SF allows for flexibility in thinking through changes of self by holding together a tight association of identity, embodiment, and narrative. In this case, scars are central to the internal and external conflicts the character experiences between self and other. The character is repeatedly scarred: by events that change the character's body, outward assemblages of sex, and emotional scars that drive the character to engage with other selves in other times. This paper will address those scars as a means of bringing potential coalitional futures between disabled people and trans people into being. The scar is an embodied site that offers multiple points of connection.

The language of "suturing" goes hand in hand with scarring and is often used in academic essays to discuss bringing ideas together. This metaphor, as it is currently implemented, falls somewhere between Wilderson's "violence of metaphor" and Mitchel and Snyder's "narrative prosthesis." In Wilderson's (2003) "Gramsci's Black Marx," he discusses the use of metaphor as a violent tendency towards black people. In his critique of metaphor, Wilderson articulates the ways in which Marxist theory disembodies understandings of collection and death through metaphor. His argument is that addressing only the metaphor, and not the reality, of killing Black people to sustain America re-enacts such violence (p. 231). In their work on "narrative prosthesis," Mitchell and Snyder argue that disability is used as a prop to elevate able-bodied protagonists through the narrative process and ignore the potentiality of a lived disabled existence (Mitchell & Snyder, 2001 p.205). Their foundational work in disability tracks the ways in which the use of disability is overwhelmingly present in narratives only as a way to "prop up" able-bodied protagonists and ideas. Such works excise meaning from living with a disability. Rather

than abandon suturing altogether, I would like to think through this process as a way to return to the flesh of the argument, as it were, and to consider how *Predestination* and its source text "All You Zombies—" allow for rethinking the act of suturing: thereby transforming it from an abstract attribution that sounds good in a paper to a practice that is attentive to the violence of its subject matter, its social framework, and its potential to knit communities as well as concepts.

The act of suturing is to use a thread (sometimes organic, sometimes synthetic) to bring together two pieces of flesh that have been parted by some act of violence ("Suture" 2017). The act of suturing is done with the intent to 'heal' some form of bodily damage. The act of suturing, however, does not return the flesh to its previous state of connection. Rather, suturing creates scar tissue. A scar is a mass of collagen that creates a site on the body which allows it to connect to multiple times and spaces: it marks the timespace of the wound and continues to exist into the future. Scar tissue forms together in an alignment—it mobilizes in a particular direction: While "the protein fibres in normal tissue have a random (basketweave) appearance… those in scar tissue have pronounced alignment in a single direction" (Sherratt, 2001). This 'alignment' between groups sites a space of interaction in the same direction: a coalitional alignment. Several scholars have argued for the potentialities of scars in disability poetry (Kuppers, 2008 p.148) and in performance studies (Stokes, 2018), but the matter has not yet been broached in science fiction. It is both prudent and necessary to discuss the potentialities that can be realized through scar studies, particularly as an informative exchange suturing discourses between intersex, trans- and disability studies.

These points of connective tissue align with what Robert McRuer calls "compulsory able-bodiedness," and my argument expands upon this concept to develop the phenomenon of compulsory embodied normativity more broadly. McRuer makes the case for an overlapping of Queer and Crip theory in the paper "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence." McRuer (2016) argues that contemporary culture "assumes in advance that we all agree: able-bodied identities, able-bodied perspectives are preferable and what we all, collectively, are aiming for" (p.303). This cultural construct advances so that "compulsory heterosexuality is intertwined with compulsory able-bodiedness; both systems work to (re)produce the able body and heterosexuality" (p.306). In resistance to this practice, McRuer draws on Judith Butler's conception of the critically queer, a framework which assumes that approximating a "norm" will ultimately result in failure, and therefore it is possible to force this failure through intentional acts of queerness (Butler, p. 26). In developing this queer/crip idea of compulsory able-bodiedness and heterosexuality, McRuer (2016) "[does] not mean to deny the materiality of queer/disabled bodies… [but] rather, to argue that critical queerness and severe disability are about collectively transforming" (p. 306). In this context, critical queerness and severe disability seem to entail the act of intentionally pushing for the failure of approximating normativity, actively refusing to enact ability/sexuality that is in line with societal pressure (McRuer, 2006 p. 30-1). This social framework (one that determines which bodies that can exist free of stigma) can be stretched to include trans and intersex people as well. The inclusion of trans people in this framework offers an embodiment of the 'collective transformation' that McRuer advocates. Trans people live in a space where the self, the social pressure of identity, and the body are inherently precarious. By extending compulsory expectations placed on bodies to include normative expectations of sex, one can see where similar goals for the groups involved open space for coalitional work.

The main character(s) from the original, textual version does not integrate with a community however, neither within the time-loop that allows interaction with various iterations of self nor without. Significantly, this community of the self plays out differently between the textual and cinematic versions of the story. In the text of "All You Zombies—" the character exists within very narrowly construed pre-

-scriptions of gender. In infancy, Jane is assigned as a girl by virtue of the doctor's proclamation. Later, with John's hysterectomy, the doctor has "rearranged things so [John] can develop properly as a man" (Heinlein, 1975 p.228). The reader's doubt about gender is only reconciled when John later sexually objectifies nurses by "staring down [their] necklines" (p. 229). It does not necessarily follow that changing a person's physical body parts will change their sexuality; however, in Heinlein's narrative this type of attraction confirms/affirms manhood. At the end of the written story, the Barkeep retires from recruiting others, lamenting then the character's previous and current self: "There isn't anybody but me—Jane –here alone in the dark. I miss you dreadfully" (p. 235). The Barkeep, identifying as Jane, laments being without the other time-selves of the story, though there is little development of an intra-personal community.

The interaction between selves in the film Predestination alters the story's narrative by entangling it with contemporary understandings of self, sexuality, and violence. In the film, the character expresses dysphoria with each new arrangement of identity. When recounting life as Jane in the orphanage, the Unmarried Mother narrates that Jane was different from both girls and boys in the childhood institution, never spending time playing with either group (Heinlein, 1975 p.225; Spierig, M. and Spierig, P. 18:46). The character's iterations as Jane, John, and the Unmarried Mother do not recognize or connect with their present selves, instead connecting with selves from other temporal locations. Each interaction with their past or future self is a learning experience across scars, where one form of the character comes to appreciate the embodiment they have had or will have. For example, Jane does not appreciate the traits visible in the mirror but is "beautiful" (1:00:16) to the Unmarried Mother. After the series of surgeries that results in the character taking the name John, John has no issue looking in the mirror because the "person [John] knew was truly gone" (42:14). John does not connect with this new embodiment of self except across time and through scars that embody what was taken in the interest of "normal" progression. The scarring caused by surgery creates discreet moments of self for the character to appreciate, through self-reflection, that which was never affirmed by the socially constructed expectations of normativity, as witnessed in John's sexual desire for Jane and Jane's reciprocation of being desired. These moments of mutual appreciation across time and scars create an internal community which pushes back against structures of social authority, such as the doctor's "normalizing" of the character's genitals with surgery, that enforce compulsory body-normativity.

Unlike the textual version of the story, which ends with the Barkeep's yearning for community, the open ending offered by the film provides an opportunity to think through the potential futures SF offers in answer to the paradox of predestination. Where the source text concludes after the Barkeep's retirement, the film's narrative continues the story beyond it, introducing a new aspect of the character in the form of the Fizzle Bomber. The Fizzle Bomber is the primary antagonist, creating explosions, killing many, and ultimately scarring the Unmarried Mother. The Barkeep retains a functioning time travel device and travels to the supposed whereabouts of the Fizzle Bomber for a final confrontation. The confrontation with the Fizzle Bomber iteration of the character replicates a scene from earlier in the film where the Barkeep comes to take the Unmarried Mother (a post-operative iteration of the character writing under a woman's pen name before being burned as a temporal agent) away from Jane. The Unmarried Mother, armed with agun pointed at the Barkeep, has no desire to leave Jane, knowing the pain that the character experienced/will experience this loss. The Barkeep explains "you know who she is, and you understand who you are. And now maybe you're ready to understand who I am" (1:16:50). The Barkeep is not making an ultimatum or trying to force the predestined continuity of time but is trying to connect with a previous self. When the Barkeep delivers the line, "maybe you're ready understand," the to character's head angles to the side and seeks

an emotional response from the Unmarried Mother with wide open eyes and a slightly open mouth. To have three physical forms of the character visible in this temporal moment embodies the complex emotional struggle of being. Each iteration of the character longs for a connection: Jane for John as an understanding friend, John for Jane as kindred spirit, and the Barkeep for their multiplicity, their being (physically and emotionally) together. The yearning in this shot is a palpable longing for connection in a way that is not sex: it is a yearning for love, community, and connection. The yearning across iterations is in defiance of socially constructed norms, each appreciating aspects of the others in the forms of scars, trauma, and difference.

In fact, the Barkeep's longing for connection arises several times in the narrative of the film. At the midpoint of the film, the Unmarried Mother asks, "[w]hat does anybody want?" and the Barkeep replies immediately with "Love" (46:13). Once the Unmarried Mother has agreed to try the Barkeep's job as a temporal agent, there is a moment of trepidation as they go over the job's lack of family or other ties: the Unmarried Mother shows fear at the idea of a life without love (58:42) and asks if there is any choice, to which the Barkeep replies that there is always a choice. After the Unmarried Mother meets Jane, the Unmarried Mother says "you pretend like love doesn't matter to you, when the truth is it's all you ever think about" (1:08:30). Working backwards through the web of scars, The Barkeep, Jane, and the Unmarried Mother actively affirm one another; these acts of understanding and compassion knit together the community of selves.

As if to complete this emotional spectrum, the final iteration of the character in the film is connected to this tissue with violence rather than compassion. The Fizzle Bomber (FB) is visibly disabled: FB uses one arm, displays browned teeth, and speaks in a manner that is theatrically codified to embody the diagnosis of "psychosis" that is part of the character's medical file at the beginning of the film (Spierig, M. and Spierig, P. 05:25). The Fizzle Bomber attempts to seek the same compassion that the Barkeep elicits from the Unmarried Mother, arguing... that "if you shoot me, you become me. That's how it happens. If you want to break the chain, you have to not kill me, but try to love me again" (1:28:42). At this time, the Fizzle Bomber has explained that the future can be changed; FB's actions saved thousands of lives in "futures that never happened because I prevented them" (1:26:01). This self is not reconcilable to the Barkeep as the other iterations had been. Instead of contributing to the reconciling scar tissue, the Fizzle Bomber is entangled with the wounding force that creates the scar itself.

To appreciate the scar as a means of understanding in science fiction, it is necessary to focus not only on its ability to come together, but to appreciate the inherent violence that brings it into being. The history of SF is a violent one which excised the voices of women, people of color, queer people, and disabled people, turning them into tropes and metaphors for difference. The Fizzle Bomber's (FB) engagement is not reparative, but violent: FB tracks the number of lives saved in alternate timelines by causing explosions, but not the lives taken in the dominant reality (Spierig, M. and Spierig, P. 1:25:54). FB performs violence that results in the scarring of the Unmarried Mother and subsequent creation of the Barkeep. The Fizzle Bomber embodies the set of violent acts that the Barkeep spent a career trying to prevent. Like science fiction, FB is engaged in wounding that is violent, but productive. The Barkeep kills the Fizzle Bomber and enters the terminal monologue of the source text, with one addendum: "can we change our futures? I don't know" (1:30:50). Until this point in the movie, the character has been faithfully reproducing the timeline that encompasses the many temporal selves, but the end of the film manifests as uncertainty. If one believes the last words of the Fizzle Bomber, the future is simultaneously changeable and determined. For the Barkeep, this marks the first moment of uncertainty, where the story deviates from the expected course and is thus laden with potential. This potential to both harm and suture is enmeshed in SF's role in shaping the future through its impact on the present

It is in the space of uncertainty that readers and writers of SF act, attempting to form futures with acts that potentially cause damage to bodies and communities. It is these acts that form scars. The scar is always in the process of being formed by violence and (re)connection. Thinking through scarring beyond the narrative of the film offers a potential for joint efforts to manipulate future remakes of this or other sf storylines. A coalitional trans and disability reading of the scar orients attention to past violence in order to bring communities together around their varied but sometimes overlapping experience.

In *Current Objectives of American Studies*, Jessica Stokes makes the case for scars as a multi-temporal, multispatial site of interaction. In "Scars for life(s)," Stokes notes that scars "exist as sites of trauma and healing simultaneously. While performance studies may attempt to limit performance to the act, the scar has no such limits" (Stokes, 2018 p.3). Drawing on the narratives of performers in *American Horror Story*'s "Freak Show" season, she notes that the "acts of trauma and separation that the freak show performers have experienced mark them with these scars: ephemera of trauma that also forms a part of a healing community" (p. 10-11). The characters in the narrative bond over both the stigma they experience from so-called "normal" people and the marks that have been put on and in their bodies. The performance of the scar in such texts works across time and space; the scar is "a queer landscape, as it is a tangible, physical location that conjures other spaces. While the scar is located on the body as a mark that hearkens to past and future temporalities, it also acts as a means to connect the body to other locales and to locate the place and method of trauma" (p. 13). The scar works as a place of connection rather than as a signifier of one moment. The scar connects the moment of being wounded to a point of recovery. In so doing, the scar defies traditional narratives of victimhood or "curing" –both common tropes associated with disability—by serving as a reminder of the complex processes and embodiment of living with impairment. It is an embodied reminder of the transformative and varied nature of flesh. The scar brings vital physicality to the stories of bodies that change through surgery. Stokes uses this vitality to discuss the potential of the scar for community formation: "Thinking through scar reminds us not to look away from violence as we consider communities formed in the assemblage of identities of disability and race. The scar is a place where these aspects of identity can communicate and form community without being flattened into a single perspective" (p. 18). As a material metaphor, the scar works as a reminder of both what has harmed a community and the ways in which coming together in view of this harm is restorative. Instead of pushing thought and consideration away, the scar invites contemplation and compassion. Because the scar connects the interior of the body to the outside world, it also works to connect the embodied self to others as community.

The multiplicity of the scar entangles it not only with physical experience, but links the embodied self to society as a result of historic practices of branding. In his work, *Transpeople,* author Christopher Shelley discusses the intersection of identity and body in trans theory. In the introduction, Shelley (2008) contends that the body of a trans person is codified in social interaction, and through this serves as a connector for the interiority of selfhood and the exteriority of gender: "How the body is socially read and how one feels about one's body meet at the primary intersection between interiority and exteriority, where gender is concerned" (p. 25). For those who go through surgical transitions, scars mark the interaction between a social reading of the body, and the trans person's attempts to change how the body is read. However, many trans people do not seek surgical intervention; some do not pursue it as they feel hormones are sufficient, others face social or economic barriers to accessing surgery, and still more face social, religious, and legal denials of their changing bodies. Trans people are often marked by societal wounds that attempt to force a reading of normativity onto them. Shelly discusses this social wounding in terms of a physical brand: "The trans subject, like those maimed Greek outcasts [slaves

and prisoners], often carries a visible social stigma" (p. 27). This observation strongly links disabled people and trans people through the origin of the term stigma: bodies that have been marked to carry a (negative) societal message. Scarring is present in the origins of stigma, and it makes sense that in returning to the matter of bodies we recognize the connective tissue between embodied and cultural markings. Throughout "—All You Zombies—" and Predestination, the scars of each iteration of the character mark dis/connection to and from society as a whole and the community of the character's multiple iterations.

I am indebted to critical race theory for the idea of the compulsory normative body that offers social connection through scarring. Wilderson's perspectives on the violence of metaphor work hand in hand with Mitchell and Snyder's "narrative prosthesis" to push back against solely metaphorical understandings of the body. These theorists understand the ways in which language and literature have a material impact on Black people and disabled people. The use of metaphor is tied to real world practices of violence, exclusion, and death. To separate the meaning of race, disability, or trans existence from its material body destroys its meaning. It is necessary to connect and engage with these wounds to find ways these conversations can be held simultaneously and across the scar tissue that marks bodies in defiance of compulsory normativity. In "Troubling the Waters" from *No Tea No Shade*, Kai Green (2016) discusses the potentiality of trans "as a value or an optic, one that, similar to queer, refuses temporal or spatial fixity" (p. 66). The author mines transness for its connective elements rather than the social divisiveness that originally marks trans people with stigma. In this formation of trans as connective, Green notes that "it is necessary to feel pain and loss, for it opens up space for something new" (p. 76) and that "we should instead be invested and committed to making space where the ability to change one's name, the power to constantly transform, and shift is an option" (p. 79). I argue that scars and offer a place for this conversation. By defying a fixed temporality of injury followed by healing (Stokes), scars provide a connection where the conversations pertinent to non-normative communities can take place. The genre of SF is invested in speculating on potential futures, but often glosses over the violence perpetrated by compulsory normativity in its early writing. An acceptance of the pain and loss of erasure that was widespread in the "Golden Age" of SF (when "—All You Zombies—" was written) expands the potentials of new futures that allow these narratives to be reshaped. A flexibility towards perceiving peoples' bodies as variable, fluid, and changing benefits not only trans people, but disabled people as well. Scars broaden embodied conversation without flattening them to the universal: making space for their particularities, differences, and points of connection in their distinctions.

Because of the exclusionary practices of early science fiction as a genre, it may be difficult to reconcile the connection between critical race theory and the early SF that comprises the core of my research. It is true that a great deal of the work in which I engage focuses on the white, male authors of SF and the white-led casts of the adaptations and reboots of these cultural artifacts. However, I attempt to bring these patterns into scholarly debate as a means of exposing the loss of diverse perspectives resulting from these cultural practices. In Patricia Holland's (2012) *Erotic Life of Racism, she mentions* "the goal here is to get comfortable with that loss… not replacing the representation, by not making the obvious critical move to recover black.female.queer with an appropriate sign of her belonging" (p. 12). Using time travel to encourage the representation of non-white, disabled, and queer people in early SF is obviously not always possible, and representation is, as Patricia Holland argues, not always desirable. However, it is possible to intentionally bring into conversation this lack of representation to focus on the emphasis placed on whiteness, ability, cis-ness, and other signifiers of compulsory normativity. It is essential to address this re-presentation of normativity as early SF is sutured into contemp-

-orary SF (re)productions.

Paying attention to the normative practices of past science fiction and disrupting its methods for codifying normativity in the future offer a means for restructuring our present moment. Holland notes the significance of cultural divisiveness: "where racism imposes racial purity, however, law and practice will code identification across differences as impossible—even if it happens, even if it is real… we are still made to choose a category, to state who our people are, and to relate to one cultural mode of being" (author's emphasis p. 5). As a genre, SF proliferates these codes of identification, but using the wounds created by past writing and present procedure offers a way forward. Connecting groups that have been excised from the body of work and questioning this loss through physical and emotional scars opens up "the touch, crossing boundaries, [which] affirms the inadequacy of this boundary between selves" (p. 101). The wounding has already occurred and will occur again as culture continues to (re)write, (re)film, and (re)generate sf cultural artifacts as contemporary entertainment. During the 2017 Disability and Disciplines conference at the Centre for Cultural and Disability studies, scholar Andrea Connell was asked why we should be spending time on films and books that reinforce ableist norms. Disability film scholar Petra Anders responded with an emphatic summation of the situation: "an able-bodied audience will still watch it, and we need to have a voice in the conversation" (Anders, 2017). The conversations around the genre of SF continue, and it is crucial that literature and film students, as well as interdisciplinary scholars, remain critical of how these narratives repeat.

There are already some scholars working towards linking conversations between disability and trans studies. While their approaches to the connection between these fields has been a step forward, their work would benefit from thinking through the embodied connection of the scar. Thinking through his own transition, scholar and activist Dean Spade (2003) discusses the harmful impacts of compulsive body normativity: "medicine produces it not through a description of the norm, but through a generalized account of the norm's transgression by gender deviants" (p. 25). Discussing the physical and psychological risks of surgery undergone in teaching hospitals, Spade recounts the scarring of a trans person by a resident surgeon: "the patient's massive scars were probably the result of the surgeon's unconscious sadism and wish to scar the patient for 'going against nature'" (p. 22). This trans person's scars resonate through time with others who have consciously or unconsciously been marked by the social pressure to conform to body normativity. While surgery may function to bring one's body closer to an alleged ideal in appearance or function, the resultant scars embody the physical marks of surgery as well as the previous social pressures which brought them into being. Spade closes with an optimistic commentary on the shared struggle of disabled and trans people: "like others in the disability rights movement, trans people are fighting against entrenched notions about what "normal" and "healthy" minds and bodies are, and fighting to become equal participants with equal access and equal protection" (p. 34). Trans people who are involved in communities with other trans individuals benefit from having foreknowledge of legal and medical requirements to physically affirm their identities. Disabled people form communities around resources to accommodate impairments and navigate the challenges of labyrinthine medical bureaucracies.

The connection between the individual body and the social body is one that is particularly salient to working coalitionally between disabled people and trans people, according to Alexandre Baril (2015). In his work, Baril discusses the many factors that impact his life: "I experience transness in much the same way I experience depression or anxiety… trans suffering can neither be separated from social oppression nor be reduced to it" (p. 69). This conflux of the medical and the social models of disability offers a potential coming together for disability and trans theory. In arguing for a disability politics of transness, Baril pushes for "the applica-

tion of tools from disability studies to trans issues" which would serve to "uncover[] cisnormativity in disability" and "denounce[] ableism in trans movements" (p. 71). Such a coalitional politic could be mobilized following a scarred alignment with an embodied understanding of shared goals.

A successful example of such a coalition can be observed surrounding the advances in community developments over scarring in mastectomies between feminist and disability groups. In the Breast Cancer Awareness campaign of 2000 called "Obsessed with Breasts," posters of women who had undergone mastectomies were created in pastiche of contemporary Calvin Klein and Victoria's Secret advertisements. Rosemarie Garland-Thompson (2002) notes that "The posters… produce a powerful visual violation by exchanging the spectacle of the eroticized breast, which has been desensationalized by its endless circulation, with the medicalized image of the scarred breast, which has been concealed from public view" (p. 12). Such a project challenges the isolation of the disabled body and questions the commodification of the female form. The scarring of the mastectomy becomes an embodied connection of disabled and women's communities.

The benefits of a community inclusive of bodily variance would serve to improve the emotional health of disabled people and trans people, and particularly those who live at the intersection of these identities. In their work "Risk and Resilience During Transgender Identity Development," Testa, Jiminez and Rankin (2014) found that trans people who had prior knowledge of other trans people when they realized they were trans were "significantly more likely to report feeling comfortable when first identifying as trans" (p. 38), less likely to report feeling suicidal (p. 38), and more likely to feel comfortable with other trans people (p. 39). These communities formed around scarring would offer an exchange of comfort and support between communities that are often already navigating various medical and social hurdles. That prior knowledge of transness can be linked to one's emotional well-being is further reason for SF to move away from reinforcing narratives of compulsory normativity.

In their work "Transgender Friendship Experiences," Galupo et. al (2014) measure the benefits of friendship and community for trans people. They found that "in particular, transgender friends offer support, have similar experiences, and share knowledge with one another" (p. 194). As part of their findings between the community of trans people and their friends who identify as queer, the researchers found that "participants related benefits of transgender and sexual minority friendship to common understandings, shared experiences or knowledge in ways that made non-normative experience primary" (p. 205). Broadening this community of non-normative experience could incorporate disabled peoples' experiences in ways that would serve to disrupt compulsive body normativity Beneficially, discussing bodies that do not adhere to compulsory normativity provides companionship within such communities. Science fiction has the potential to bring these communities together, if it is willing to work to undo its past erasures and to recognize non-normative embodiments as valid. The work being done to integrate trans and disabled communities is happening in legal, activist, and scholarly communities, however it has not yet been integrated into popular culture. The coalitional reading/viewing of *Predestination* in this article offers the opportunity to suture these community efforts to widespread popular culture conversations. In *Predestination*, scars work across time and place to suture together the various incarnations of Jane, the Unmarried Mother, and the Barkeep. Through these lingering embodiments of wounding, the character lives out a lasting desire for love and connection. Instead of remaining mired in the biological determination that permeated the source text, Predestination broadens the possible connective tissue between body and identity— though only to a certain extent. As more people push against a compulsive normativity that puts social pressure on and forces readings of the various configurations of the body, it is inevitable that stigma and scarring will

continue. However, one can hope that these (inevitable?) wounds can be the sites of future communities.

The Future is Scar-y, continued

References

Baril, A. (2015). Transness as Debility: Rethinking Intersections Between Trans and Disabled Embodiments. *Feminist Review*, 111(1). Retreived from https://www.jstor.org/stable/24572216

Browne, S. (2015) *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness.* Durham: Duke UP.

Butler, J. (1993) Critically Queer. *GLQ: Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies,* 1(1), pp. 17-34. https:// doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1-1-17

DeGraw, S. (2007) *The Subject of Race in American Science Fiction*. New York: Routledge.

Galupo, P., Baurband, A., Gonzalez, K., Hagen, B., Hether, S., and Krum, T. (2014). Transgender Friendship Experiences: Benefits and Barriers of Friendships Across Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation. *Feminism & Psychology* 24(2), pp. 193-215. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353514526218

Garland-Thompson, R. (2002). Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory. *NWSA Journal ,* 14(3), pp. 1-32. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/4316922

Green, K. (2016). Mobilizing a Trans*Analytic. *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies.* Duke University Press, 2016.

Godfrey, A.. (2014, November 29). Ethan Hawke: Mining your life is the only way to stumble on anything real. *The Guardian*, Retreived from https://www.theguardian.com-film/2014/nov/29/ethan-hawke-boyhood-before-midnight

Gumbs, A.P. (2017, March 22). Left of Black with Hortense Spillers and Alexis Pauline Gumbs. Youtube, Season Seven. *John Hope Franklin Center,* Duke University. Retreived from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ui-EZQ1BTfE

Holland, S.P. (2012) *The Erotic Life of Racism.* Durham, Duke University Press.

Heinlein, R. A. (1975) All You Zombies—. In R. Silverberg, *The Mirror of Infinity: a Critics Anthology of Science Fiction*, pp.223-238. New York, NY: Harper & Row.

Kafer, A. (2013). *Feminist, Queer, Crip.* Bloomington: Indiana UP.

Kuppers, P. (2008). Scars in Disability Culture Poetry: Towards Connection. *Disability and Society,* 23(2), pp. 141-150. Retreived from https://doi.org/10.1080/09687590701841174

Le Guin, U. K. (1993). Introduction. In U. K. LeGuin & B. Attebery (Eds.), *The Norton Book of Science Fiction*, pp. 15-44. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

McRuer, R.. (2006), *Crip Theory: Signs of Queerness and Disability.* New York: NYUP.

McRuer, R. (2016). Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence. In L.J. Davis (Ed.), *Disability Studies Reader, (*5th ed., pp. 301-308). New York: Routledge.

McWeeny, D. (2015, January 9). Predestination directors on Ethan Hawke and their gender-Bending time travel trip. *Hitfix: Uproxx*. Retrevied from https://uproxxcom/hitfix/predestination-directors-on-ethan-hawke-and-their-gender-bending-time-travel-trip/

Melley, T. (2012). T*he Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction, and the National Security State.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP.

Milburn, C. (2016, November 9). Ahead of Time: Gerald Feinberg, James Blish, and the Governance of Futurity. In S. Harding & D. Rosenberg (Eds.), *Histories of the Future.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP.Retreived from http://histscifi.com/

Mitchell, D. T. and Snyder, S.L. (2001). *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse.* Ann Arbor, Michigan: Michigan UP.

Panshin, A. (1970). Introduction. In R. Silverberg, *Mirror of Infinity.* Canfield Press.

Reed, C.D. (2007, November). (2007). Dazzlers: Ancients Reborn in Bright Array. *Harvard Magazine*. Retreived from https://harvard

(cont...)

The Future is Scar-y, continued

References (cont...)

magazine. com/2007/ 11/dazzlers-html
Shelley, C. (2008). *Trans people: Repudiation, Trauma Healing.* Toronto, University of Toronto Press.
Sherratt, J. A. (2001). Mathematical Modelling of Scar Tissue Formation. Retreived from www.macs.hw.ac.uk Heriot-Watt. 2001.
Spade, D. (2003). Resisting Medicine, Re/modeling Gender. *Berkeley Journal of Gender, Law & Justice*, 15(39), pp. 15-37. Retreived from https://scholarship.law.berkeley.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1190&context=bglj
"suture, n." (2017). OED Online, Oxford University Press, Retrieved from www.oed.com/view/Entry/195263.
77
Testa, R., Jimenez, C.L., & Rankin, S. (2014)l Risk and Resilience During Transgender Identity Development: The Effects of Awareness and Engagement with Other Transgender People on Affect. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health,* 18(1), 31-46, Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/19359705.2013.8051
Wilderson, F. (2003) Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society? *Social Identities* 9(2), 225-240. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/1350463032000101579

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2019
ISSN 2472-0837

Thatcher's Legacy?
Individualism and the Neurological Condition in Ian McEwan's *Saturday*

Antony Mullen, Durham University

Abstract: According to Susan Green (2010), Ian McEwan's 2005 novel *Saturday* represents a new kind of science fiction. It is, on the one hand, a reflection on the political undercurrents of Britain in the age of New Labour the War on Terror. On the other, it also represents McEwan's interest in neuroscience and an exploration of how degenerative mental conditions, such as dementia and Huntington's disease, impact memory and, consequently lead to a loss of identity.

This essay explores the interaction between the political and the neuroscientific in *Saturday*, viewing the relationship between the two through the prism of the concept of "aspirational individualism." In doing so, it argues that *Saturday* detects—at a time when the nature of 'New Labour' was up for debate—the continuity of a Thatcherite conceptualisation of the individual.

The novel, I suggest, offers a critique of this way of thinking about individualism by drawing attention to how dengenerative conditions, especially those which are inherited, undermine a person's liberty and their ability to forge their own identity. The deployment of neuroscience in the novel is, in that sense, used to engage with (and ultimately express criticism of) a Thatcherite notion of the free individual.

Keywords: English; Literature; Medical Humanities; Political Studies; Neurodiversity; *Saturday*

Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) is set in London in 2003 and, though it is not "science fiction" in a typical sense, the novel follows a day in the life of neuroscientist Henry Perowne. Moreover, *Saturday* is explicitly grounded in the era of New Labour and has as its backdrop a protest march against the 2003 war in Iraq. It was at the time of the Iraq war and the novel's publication (c.2003-05) that some commentators on the left—as well as on the right—started to view Tony Blair as a Prime Minister with neoconservative tendencies.[1] Laura Colombino (2017) argues, unconvincingly, that the novel should be understood in a specifically post-9/11 context, seeing the novel as one in which individual bodies represent or symbolise spaces of terror. This reading, though, is short-sighted and fails to recognise the importance of how the individual (beyond just the corporeal self) is genetically and socially constructed. While she appears to correctly identify the novel's exploration of how genetics can threaten the sense of an individual "self," she fails to place this into wider debates about the narrative self, as I will do in this article. The novel also comments upon the place of the arts and the sciences in contemporary society, on professionalised medicine and the ethics of care, and, to a lesser extent, upon ideas of lifestyle and consumerism. But fundamentally, at the heart of *Saturday* is an exploration of the interaction between narrative, the construction of the individual self, and the limits of individualism—limits which are, in particular, imposed by a disability which takes the form of a neurological condition. In *Saturday*, McEwan's focus on the incurable neurological condition suffered by Baxter highlights those aspects of the self (and the cognitive abilities required to constitute the self (such as a functional memory), which are beyond the control of the individual.

1979 marked the beginning of almost two decades of Conservative Party governance, first under Margaret Thatcher and subsequently under John Major. It was not until 1997 that Labour returned to government, having had a series of leaders during its time in Opposition: James Callaghan (1976-1980), Michael Foot (1980-1983), Neil Kinnock (1983-1992), John Smith (1992-1994), Margaret Beckett (1994) and Tony Blair (1994-1997).[2] But when the party won

in 1997, now under the guise of New Labour, it was significantly transformed. Overall, this article is not concerned with the exact reasons why, or the moment at which, Labour changed but, clearly, the Labour Party led by Michael Foot was markedly different to the New Labour manifestation led by Tony Blair. Instead, it is concerned with how McEwan's *Saturday* can be read as a reflection of the continuities of Thatcherism into the 21st century. As a public intellectual, McEwan has talked of his own ambivalence towards Blair and the Iraq War; he was aligned with others like Christopher Hitchens, primarily through the New Atheist movement, who were more openly pro-Iraq. Throughout the novel, there are clear indications that McEwan is aware of the various (and enduring) claims that Blair was a neoliberal and/or a neoconservative. *Saturday,* therefore, is a consideration of this ambivalence, not just about Blair and the Iraq war, but about the extent to which New Labour represented a continuation of Thatcherism (of which McEwan had been openly critical throughout the 1980s). One of the most significant ways that the political condition of Britain is explored in the novel is through its exploration of disability and the limits it poses to notions of "individualism."

In 2011, in one of his last contributions to the study of Thatcherism, Stuart Hall opined that Tony Blair was part of a "neoliberal revolution" that began under Thatcher. Hall took the view that "New Labour repositioned itself from centre-left to centre-right" (2011, p.19) and, like Thatcherism, he saw in it a tension between two fundamentally contradictory forces.[3] Hall stated that, in New Labour, there "was a continuous tension between a strident, Fabian, Benthamite tendency to regulate and manage the ideology of the market, with its pressure for market access to areas of public life from which it had hitherto been excluded" (2011, p.20). The meta-narrative about several decades of unhindered neoliberalism, however, is a tired one which finds little appreciation among political scientists and historians today. There is some accuracy in what Hall suggests, but simply to say that Thatcher and Blair were part of the same neoliberal lineage is as crude as it is incorrect. There is clear evidence, at the level of policymaking, that Thatcherism influenced New Labour, but there is also evidence (at this same level) that Blair fits much more comfortably in the Labour tradition than Hall's thesis acknowledged. As Ben Jackson (2017) has noted, for example, this is true of New Labour's childcare policy. The neoliberals on the right in the 1980s had supported a childcare voucher model, but New Labour's policy in the 1990s and beyond represented a shift towards state provision. This, however, was not universal: it did not return the state to the role that Labour manifestoes of previous decades had proposed. The policy, in the end, represented a patchwork of public and private providers. Despite the presence of the state in New Labour's policy, Jackson argues that the fact Blair did not introduce a universal childcare policy represents a success of neoliberal thinking—but not a direct continuity. Much in the same way, Richard Heffernan also sees New Labour not as a direct continuity, but as an "accommodation to and adaption of Thatcherism" (2000, p.178). So, while New Labour did not simply represent the continuation of the same "revolution" as Thatcherism, as Hall suggested, Thatcherism's influence upon it was evident and discernible. This article analyses how *Saturday* deals with ideas of aspirational individualism—and engages with contemporary philosophical debates about the aspirational self—to examine the extent to which the new 'Blairite' Labour Party had followed in the footsteps of Thatcherism.

As well as speaking to the specific political moment of the New Labour era, the novel also follows contemporary philosophical debates about the notion of the narrative self which began in the 1980s and continued into the 21st century. The concept of the narrative self—the constitution, representation and articulation of an individual identity through narrative(s)—was central to works by Charles Taylor, Jerome Bruner, Marya Schechtman, Daniel Dennett and Anthony Giddens.[4] In 2003, Samantha Vice wrote that although individual lives are constituted through narrative, each person does not constitute

their identity through narrative in the same way: some may actively think about their lives as a narrative while others may do it only in moments of reflection. Much more significant to both Thatcherism and the novel discussed here, though, is Vice's justification for why individual lives are understood in narrative terms. She states that "we experience ourselves and the world in a way [sic] that is meaningful and coherent, with a trajectory of development, in a way that promises, or actively seeks closure and significance" (2003, p.97). Although it is not explicitly identified, Vice's explanation of how the self operates through narrative has, at its heart, aspiration and hope. The aspirational individual is imagined to be the archetypal Thatcherite voter: hardworking entrepreneurs growing their business and working-class families buying their council houses under Right to Buy. But the role of aspiration in *Saturday* should not be overlooked, as it is through aspiration (and the myths surrounding what Vice calls the "trajectory of development" that McEwan explores the continuities of Thatcherite ideas of individualism.

Saturday takes place on 15th February 2003 and, like James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), the events of the novel occur within the space of a day. The novel opens with Henry Perowne, who has woken up in the early hours of the morning, bearing witness to a burning aeroplane gliding through the night sky. Henry follows developments about the plane crash via the television news throughout the course of the day; while it is of interest to him, though, the protest against the invasion of Iraq takes precedence and leads the news bulletins. The significance of narrative in the novel is established from the outset. Moreover, McEwan's protagonist—who often sees the world of the novel from a materialist perspective, reducing people to their genetic makeup and dismissing different aspects of self-identification—introduces the theme in his contrasting of the arts and sciences. Henry's daughter, Daisy, is a poet. The divide between the arts and the sciences in the novel is most prominently articulated through the tensions in their father-daughter relationship, with Henry representative of the sciences and Daisy of the arts. Throughout the novel, Henry reads literary works at Daisy's recommendation but fails to understand the importance she places upon them and upon storytelling more broadly. Henry claims to be "living proof" (p.68) that people can live without stories, contrary to Daisy's belief. This, however, is not true. Although it appears true to him, McEwan undermines his narrator's claim by returning to Henry's worldview—which is itself informed through a particular narrative which Henry has constructed—throughout the novel. Henry is not a Thatcherite. His dislike for Thatcher is revealed in his political disagreements with his father-in-law, a poet nicknamed Grammaticus, who is described as "an early fan of Mrs Thatcher" (p.195). Henry also displays a degree of ambivalence towards Tony Blair, who is identified as the Prime Minister in the novel and who Henry has met. When Perowne sees Blair on TV, he describes how he feels forced to ask himself if Blair is trustworthy and looks for clues that he is lying—but all he ever sees, "at worst", is "a straining earnestness" (p.145). Aside from the personalities of the political era, however, Henry's ideological positions are much more complex and often put him at odds with his left-wing daughter. More significantly, though, these views are not simply stated at random. Instead, Henry constructs a narrative through which he justifies his politics: far from living without stories, *Saturday* has at its heart Henry Perowne's defence of liberal capitalist democracy and globalisation.[5] This defence manifests as a story of global improvement over recent decades. He states that "At every level, material, medical, intellectual, sensual, for most people it [the world] has improved" (p.77). Upon passing the Chinese embassy in London, Henry's reflects upon how technology has made it unsustainable for Communist authoritarianism to persist in China. The country's economy has, in his view, "grown too fast" and "the modern world's too connected" for the Communist Party to "keep control" (p.123). The reason behind this, he proposes, is consumerism. He cites, as evidence for his claim about China, the growing presence of mainland Chinese consumers in Harrods "soaking

up the luxury goods" (p.123). Yet, in his overall political thesis, it is not the products themselves but the very idea of consumerism—and the associated connotations of aspiration and the freedom to choose—which Henry says will be transformative. This notion is reinforced by his observation of how London has been transformed, for the better, by globalisation's introduction of different cultures through commercial enterprise. He remarks that:

> This commercial wellbeing is robust and will defend itself to the last. It isn't rationalism that will overcome religious zealots, but ordinary shopping and all that it entails—jobs for a start, and peace, and some commitment to realisable pleasures, the promise of appetites sated in this world, not the next. Rather shop than pray. (p.126)

Again, despite not being a Thatcherite, Henry celebrates the virtue of liberal capitalist democracy as one in which consumerism, choice, and economic prosperity are the antidote to ideological extremism and authoritarianism.

Aside from explaining his worldview, Henry's narrative also establishes a sense of order and cohesion out of the modern-day crisis that appears to challenge it: radical Islamic terror. For Henry, despite the threat of Islamism the "world has not fundamentally changed" (p.77). Rather, "Islamic terror will settle into place" alongside other "crises" such as climate change and other recent wars. Henry actively uses this narrative of stability and progress as a counter-narrative to another. He imagines left-wing academics offering their students accounts of modern history which are designed for entertainment value and miss important examples of human progress which are deemed to be boring. Henry says of a local university:

> The young lecturers there like to dramatize modern life as a sequence of calamities. It's their style, their way of being clever. It wouldn't be cool or professional to count the eradication of smallpox as part of the modern condition. Or the spread of recent democracies. (p.77)

This, he goes on to suggest, is a systematic problem "for the humanities" in general, as "misery is more amenable to analysis: happiness is a harder nut to crack" (p.78).[6] McEwan's framing of the humanities in *Saturday* contrasts their role in other British novels of the same year which dealt with similar themes, such as Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005). Henry Perowne sees the humanities as a means of reinforcing a narrative about human misery and decline, whereas in Ishiguro's novel, the humanities function as a way of making the lives of Hailsham's students meaningful. However, the humanities are presented, in both cases, as the antithesis of science and a force for deception.

Beyond this, though, the most significant exploration of narrative—and the narrative self—in *Saturday* is revealed in Henry's perception and medical analysis of a series of individuals with debilitating neurological conditions: his mother, patients at his hospital and, above all, Baxter[7]. McEwan's exploration of individualism in the novel is articulated most powerfully through his juxtaposed representations of Henry and Baxter, the violent gang leader whose car collides with Henry's. The confrontation leads to the novel's climax, in which Baxter breaks into Henry's home during a family dinner. Baxter is pushed down the stairs by Henry's son and sustains head injuries; later that evening, Henry is called by his hospital to operate on Baxter. It is during their initial heated exchange that Henry, aware that he cannot take on Baxter's gang physically, uses his knowledge as a neuroscientist to expose Baxter's condition. Baxter suffers from Huntington's disease, an inherited disorder which manifests as mental dysfunction, like memory loss, and physical symptoms including unsteadiness. His self-described reductionist perspective leads him to say of Baxter that "There is much in human affairs that can be accounted for at the level of the complex molecule" (p.91). His "reading" of the signs of Baxter's illness also enables him to separate other personality traits

which he considers to be a performance: Henry is bemused by Baxter's gang as their threats seem to be like quotations from films that they have seen (p.90). In distinguishing between the ostensibly false, performed aspect of Baxter's behaviour and the (even if unknown to Baxter and his friends) serious reality of his condition, Henry begins to challenge the idea of a narrative, self-determined self. Rather, he says that Baxter's condition—the signs of which are clear to him—represent "biological determinism in its purest form" (p.93): Baxter's future is something over which he has no control because of a single, inherited gene. That Henry specifies that the gene is not simply the cause of the illness but that it is inherited further undermines the concept of the individual being an isolated, self-determined construction. In Baxter's case, his fate was determined at birth because of his parents' own genetic makeup. Nonetheless, the single inherited gene makes impossible any attempt by Baxter to live a life of his choosing as both his psychology and physical form are affected. This is made clear when Henry delves into specific details of how Baxter's condition will worsen over time. Vice's account indicates that individual narrative trajectories are of great significance to how the narrative self operates. Baxter's condition, however, means that he is unable to conceive of a future. Not only does his knowledge of what will happen to him limit his aspiration, but Henry points out that the cognitive means by which he can forge a narrative of his life—his memory and his consciousness—will deteriorate (p.96). Henry claims, upon reflection, to have seen in Baxter an acknowledgment of his limited future juxtaposed with his hidden aspiration. He says that Baxter displayed "real intelligence" as well as "dismay that he was living the wrong life" (p.111). The sentiment contained within the notion of "living the wrong life" furthers Henry's case: the "correct" alternative, imagined as part of a narrative project of self-betterment, cannot counter or overcome the way that the individual is determined, fundamentally, by the genetic.[8]

This initial encounter with Baxter is one of numerous instances in the novel where Henry's reductionist viewpoint challenges the notion of the socially-constructed self. His view of how individual lives are a combination of biological determinism and social construction is articulated in his blurring of another patient's condition with the plane crash witnessed that morning. The patient is presented as a stroppy and difficult person who will nonetheless "pull through" following her recent surgery (p.105). Beyond that, Henry says that it is her "own decision to crash" after a colleague suggests that she will "go down in flames" (p.105). The implication of this exchange is that human agency is secondary to biology: only after her condition has been treated is she free to be the cause of her own downfall. The language used to convey this mirrors the description of the plane crash, thereby suggesting that individual agency operates in a similar way: that the overall trajectory (that the plane will crash) cannot be altered but some limited control (such as how the plane crashes) can be exerted. Henry also sees the place of narrative and an aspirational trajectory as secondary to biology in the case of a second patient, Andrea Chapman. Andrea, a child whose operation has been a success, is contrasted with Baxter: she will make a full recovery and, Henry accepts, her life will be her own. He says of her future ambition, inspired by his own medical practice:

> No one will ever quite know how many real or imagined medical careers are launched in childhood during post-operative daze. Over the years, a few kids have divulged such an ambition to Henry Perowne on his rounds, but no one has quite burned with it the way Andrea Chapman does now. (p.260)

At the heart of Henry's reflection, though, is the suggestion that aspirational narratives are imagined futures with no guaranteed reality. Finally, Henry's own mother, who suffers from dementia, is cited as a fourth instance of biologically-determined deterioration overwhelming the socially-constructed, narrativized self. Following a visit to his mother's care home, he talks about her memory loss which has

already been established, in his analysis of Baxter, as a function of the brain upon which the narrative self is reliant. He refers to "the woman she once was" and describes how his visit "merges in memory with all the rest" (p.153). Vice's narrative trajectory is further contradicted by Henry's mother's dementia. As well as losing her ability to remember who she is, her condition also removes her ability to be grounded in the present: she believes, Henry says, that her own mother is coming to collect her from the care home (p.160). However, of the four cases, it is here that he begins to concede that literary narratives can change human relations. Henry states that he once saw his mother as less intelligent than himself, and looked down upon her for being without curiosity. By reading a Victorian novel, though, he becomes more able to understand his mother's achievements. He discovers, through the novel, "themes," which explain his mother's life story and is able, for the first time, to empathise with her (pp.155-156). This acknowledgment of literature's affective potential is derived from Daisy's insistence that he reads the novels she recommends. Her opinion of her father is summarised thus: "she thinks he's a coarse, unredeemable materialist. She thinks he lacks an imagination. Perhaps it's so, but she hasn't quite given up on him yet" (p.134). However, it is not his newfound empathy for his mother through which he realises literature's affective power, but in the final confrontation with Baxter at his home.

The close of the novel sees the return of Baxter. This time Baxter, accompanied by his gang, has broken into the Perowne family home during a family dinner party, at which Henry's wife, children, and father-in-law are present. This moment also sees the return of Henry's analysis of Baxter, in which the notion of a narrative self is more explicitly criticised. Henry continues to articulate a definition of the individual which is not based on aspiration or a social identity, but based upon biology and genetic makeup. To explain the irrational steps that Baxter has taken, Henry reflects upon "the truth" of Baxter's knowledge of his own condition (p.210). Henry's comments suggest that Huntington's makes it impossible for Baxter to see himself as part of a broader narrative trajectory, in the way that Andrea Chapman does, because he "believes he has no future and is therefore free of consequences" (p.210).[9] During the time in which Baxter is in his home, Henry observes:

> the unique disturbances, the individual expression of his condition—impulsiveness, poor self-control, paranoia, mood swings, depression balanced by outbursts of tempter, some of this, or all of it and more, would have helped him, stirred him, as he reflected his quarrel with Henry this morning. (p.210)

To an extent, then, Baxter's irrational actions (which might otherwise be framed as an individualistic expression of anger or rejection of the situation in which he finds himself) are not entirely his own. Henry's summary of his condition here removes Baxter's agency and deflects his behaviour, at least in part, onto his condition. What is more, not only is Baxter's future compromised by his condition, but it also begins to change his identity in the present. Henry notes that soon Baxter's illness will render his physical form "too absurd" to continue to perform his established social identity.[10] Henry says:

> Over the coming months and years the athetosis, those involuntary, uncontrolled movements, and the chorea—the helpless jitters, the grimacing, the jerky raising of the shoulders and flexing fingers and toes—will overwhelm him, render him too absurd for the street. His kind of criminality is for the physically sound. At some point he'll find himself writing and hallucinating on a bed he'll never leave, in a long-term psychiatric ward, probably friendless, certainly unlovable, and there his slow deterioration will be managed, with efficiency if he's in luck. Now, while he can still hold a knife, he has come to assert his dignity, and perhaps even shape the way he'll be remembered. (p.211)

However, with this declaration, Henry inadvertently highlights another means by which identities are constructed and maintained through narrative: specifically, how memories are shaped. This is the beginning of a sequence of statements which betray his initial notion, that people can live without stories, was not entirely correct. Although he has already identified that Baxter will suffer memory loss, his comment about shaping "the way he'll be remembered" emphasises the extent to which narratives of the self, persist in others' memories. To an extent, Baxter appears able to control how he will be remembered and how the narrative account of his life, even after the eventual decline that Henry describes, will play out. The control he has over this and his own individualism as individual agency, however, remains limited. What Perowne begins to articulate is an understanding of individual identity seen as an interaction between the biological and the social, but in which control over both is limited. Within this definition, biological factors still outweigh social influences in the constitution of the individual: the former can render the latter inoperable, as Baxter's illness demonstrates. However, where socially-constructed individualism is more significant than biologically-determined individualism is in relation to how individuals are remembered by others, Henry suggests that Baxter remains capable, despite his own inevitable demise, of shaping how others will remember him. In this way, his identity will continue to be narrativised by how others construct him in memory—and his socially-constructed self, rather than his genetic makeup, will determine how he exists in such accounts. The second instance of Henry's realisation of storytelling's importance comes when Baxter forces Daisy, now naked, to read one of her poems to him. The affective power of Daisy's writing causes Baxter to become over-emotional which, subsequently, allows Henry to outwit him and lead him away from his family. In the moment Henry witnesses Baxter's emotional breakdown, the literary narrative's affective function is secondary to the observation that narrative appears to be intrinsic to the human mind. Specifically, Henry acknowledges that, in Baxter's deteriorating mind, there is a loss of the narrative process through which we understand and articulate a "continuous self" (p.223). Once again, he posits a definition of individualism which is an interaction between genetics and narrative, and in which a genetic defection manifests as the breakdown of that narrative. In Baxter's case, Henry states that "It's of the essence of a degenerating mind, periodically to lose all sense of continuous self, and therefore any regard for what others think of your lack of continuity" (pp.223-224). Baxter's lack of continuity, in this instance, is the sudden shift from his performed street thug identity to somebody who is visibly emotional because of Daisy's poem. The implication of what Henry concludes, though, is that a functional mind, unaffected by an impairment of any kind, is one which comprehends the world and the individual's place and relations within it through a narrative structure.

The novel ends with Henry's more assertive and explicit rejection of the idea of the socially-constructed individual: Perowne reflects upon the nature of individualism, and why people live the lives they do, and concludes that "It can't just be class or opportunities—the drunks and junkies come from all kinds of backgrounds, as do the office people. Some of the worst wrecks have been privately educated." (p.272). Here he rejects various processes of socialisation, such as economic advantages and education, as the key factors which shape individual identities. Vice's definition of the narrative self is one in which a clear trajectory exists and individual lives are coherently structured and narrated through largely self-determined stories. By contrast, for Henry, "The random ordering of the world" presents the individual with "a trillion trillion possible futures" (p.128). In Henry's view, too many peoples' lives either exceed the limitations imposed upon them by their background or, by contrast, they lead lives in adulthood which are comparatively worse than during adolescence. Instead, "Perowne, the professional reductionist, can't help thinking it's down to invisible folds and kinks of character, written in code, at the level of molecules," adding that "No amount of social justice will cure or disperse

this enfeebled army haunting the public places of every town" (p.272). To this end, Jane Macnaughton is right to state that the novel "does not make a convincing case for the efficacy of a literary education for doctors. Perowne can live without fiction and is clearly able to be responsive to his patients' stories without first having his sensibilities refined by literature" (2007, p.74). Henry is more understanding of literature's affective power, of its significance in others' lives, and of the importance of storytelling in the construction of identities. None of these discoveries are, however, so fundamental that they alter either his professional practice or his political philosophy, which is reinforced at the end of the novel. The unknown narrator, acknowledging Henry's reductionist perspective, explicitly criticised the so-called political Third Way—with its emphasis on social justice—upon which New Labour was built. What is more, the suggestion that state intervention is capable of alleviating inequality and social disadvantage is rejected. Instead, a more typically Thatcherite alternative is presented, reflecting the sentiment of Thatcher's "no such thing as society" comments: that individuals are ultimately responsible for their own behaviour, not society. Ultimately, then, this appears as something of a contradiction within the novel. Henry has consistently presented the view that there are limitations to individualism, both biological (in terms of genetic defects) and social (in that we cannot control how others construct our identities). Nonetheless, despite this lack of control, the novel concludes with the view that individual identities are pre-determined: while self-narration has a role to play in providing coherence and structure in individuals' lives, the scope of these narratives is limited by that which is already "written in code" (p.272). What Perowne does, then, is to reject the concept of the aspirational individual at the heart of Thatcherism, while simultaneously making the biomedical case for the Thatcherite idea of self-reliance and the argument against the welfare state.

Fundamentally, what the novels seeks to do, then, is to challenge the emphasis placed upon the aspirational individual within Thatcherite discourse. In particular, Saturday's aim is to draw attention to the extent to which freedom and individual choice are limited. The main way in which the novel achieves this is by emphasising the differences between socially-constructed and genetically-determined notions of "the individual." Within the novel's exploration of these two expressions of individualism, there are two main common themes. The first is the contrasting of the humanities (associated with socially-constructed identities) with the biological sciences (linked to genetically-determined identities). In the novel, aspiration and self-determination are undermined by the biological factors that influence individuals. *Saturday*'s Baxter is seen to perform an identity of his choosing—but the circumstances of his birth undermine any element of choice in deciding his future. Samantha Vice's identification of a narrative trajectory at the heart of the narrative self is especially important to my reading of *Saturday*. It is these characters' lack of future in particular—and the futility of a rhetoric which promotes ambition and self-reliance—which most forcefully challenges the Thatcherite conceptualisation of individualism. The second theme is the introduction of medical tropes—and, particularly, the exploration of power and authority through the professional-patient relationship. This relationship serves as a vehicle through which a patient's identity is changed against their will. The authority attached to the medical professional in both cases affords them the ability to deny the patient's self-expression by drawing upon the genetically-determined aspects of their identity, over which they have a greater understanding. To this end, the novels propose that individual identities, fates, and opportunities are not solely determined by individuals themselves—and they highlight the extent to which those in positions of authority can re-work and revise the narrativised identities that individuals have articulated.

Yet, despite the challenge the novel poses to Thatcherite ideas of aspiration and individualism, it demonstrates an ambivalence towards them, rather than an explicit rejection of them. Henry Pero-

wne's celebration of Western capitalist liberal democracy, the end of the Cold War, medical developments in recent decades and his general sense that life has improved for most people appears acceptant of some aspects of Thatcher's legacy. His observation that there is a direct link between consumerism and freedom is not unlike Thatcher's own view. McEwan's exploration of the narrative self also concludes that narratives—even if untrue—can provide necessary frameworks through which individuals can feel more fulfilled. This is articulated clearly in the contrasting of how disability is experienced by Baxter (who has no future) and Andrea Chapman (who does, precisely because she presents an aspirational narrative trajectory). As a result, both portrayals challenge elements of the Thatcherite discourse surrounding individualism, but they also provide justification for why the idea—even if flawed—of the self-determined, aspirational individual in control of their fate can be fulfilling. The novel, fundamentally, also highlights the potential for McEwan's "new" science fiction, and the exploration of disability, to act as a means by which to interrogate political thought.

Notes

[1] Ben Rawlence (2004) wrote in the *Guardian* that Tony Blair's neoconservatism predated that of George W. Bush. Rawlence stated that Blair was a neoconservative, and not simply a liberal interventionist, because of the "scope of his ambition": Blair, apparently, had an "agenda" which was "almost imperial in scope" (n.p.). Writing from the right, Douglas Murray also suggests, in *Neoconservatism*: *Why We Need It* (2005), that Blair's neoconservative foreign policy preceded Bush's, rather than followed it. Murray also identifies, in the neoconservatism of Blair and Bush, an acknowledgment of the End of History thesis and a celebration of the triumph of liberal democracy (p.163). Mark Mardell (2003) wrote, for the BBC, that Blair was not a neoconservative, but that his agenda was compatible with that of neoconservatives like Dick Cheney.

[2] James Callaghan and Michael Foot both resigned the leadership following General Election losses. Neil Kinnock did not resign after Labour's 1987 General Election defeat as the party won 20 seats and increased its share of the vote; Kinnock resigned following Labour's loss at the 1992 General Election. John Smith died in office and Margaret Beckett subsequently held the role on a temporary, acting basis. Tony Blair remained leader until his resignation in 2007, having won three General Elections.

[3] There is a degree of truth in this. Analysis by the Comparative Manifesto Data project team demonstrates that in 1997, for the first time, Labour's manifesto was classifiably "centre-right". New Labour's 2001 manifesto returned it (although only marginally) to the centre-left, following which it began to move more to the centre (Afonso, 2015).

[4] Anthony Giddens was a significant influence on Tony Blair's politics. As Bill Jordan points out, Giddens' "Third Way" "redefined the central terms of the debate between liberalism and socialism" by "fusing individual choice with equality and social justice" (2010, p.47). The continued focus on individualism and individual choice (albeit framed in a different way) is one indicator of Thatcherism's influence on New Labour and social democracy more broadly. Giddens, though, did not accept that New Labour was a continuation of Thatcherism. In his reflection of its time in office, he said that he understood why some felt New Labour did not deliver the "New Dawn" it promised, but he nonetheless distinguished it from the "disastrous legacy" of Thatcherism (Giddens, 2010, n.p.).

[5] Further to this, he also acknowledges that the news media constructs a narrative in the way in which it sets its agenda and constructs a narrative about what is important and what is less important. He notes that the media's interpretation of which of the day's events is most important is contrary to his own (p.178)

[6] Curtis D. Carbonell (2010) has read McEwan's *Enduring Love* (1997) as evidence of McEwan's interest in exploring the common ground between the humanities and the sciences—and bringing them

into conversation. This interest, as I will demonstrate, is also present in *Saturday*. McEwan presents Henry as a self-confessed reductionist, initially sceptical of the humanities. By the end of the novel, though, Henry's worldview is altered when McEwan causes the sciences and humanities to collide during Baxter's invasion of the Perowne family home. This reading is supported by Jane F. Thrailkill's (2011) essay "Ian McEwan's Neurological Novel," in which she argues that McEwan presents a constructivist model of knowledge, in a narrative in which individuals (including the author) contribute to the creation of knowledge. For her, *Saturday* is a meditation upon how to bridge the gap between the humanities and the sciences.

[7]The significance of disability and neurological medical science in the novel, even despite its political themes, leads Susan Green (2010) to conclude that, in *Saturday*, Ian McEwan has created a new form of science fiction. Green justifies this claim by stating that the novel deploys the "language and interests of science as narrative technique" and that McEwan uses the novel as a vehicle to promote a "cultural shift in ideas" about consciousness, as well as capturing ideas about consciousness (2010, p.70). This "new form" of science fiction is one which uses an accessible literary form to communicate ideas about science and "explore what we do not yet understand" (Green, 2010, p.71).

[8] Giving Baxter a severe genetic condition like Huntington's syndrome reinforces Perowne's point in a way that a character with a simpler genetic disorder would not. This is an example of how, as I have mentioned, McEwan prepares to stage an interaction between the sciences and the humanities at the end of the novel: by equipping Perowne with concrete evidence which supports his reductionist worldview (in the form of Baxter's condition, rather than a simpler one), McEwan enables him to articulate his position unchallenged until the final confrontation.

[9]There is an implicit suggestion here that to see oneself as part of a narrative trajectory—in which one's aspirations and a meaningful future could be put at risk by actions such as Baxter's—is also a form of control. In this sense, the idea of the narrative self encapsulates the tension, inherent in Thatcherism, between liberty and authority.

[10] I use the word "perform" consciously here as, in their initial exchange, Henry makes multiple references to the comical and bemusing actions of Baxter and his gang which he sees as a performance rather than a genuine identity. Henry likens their initial threats to lines from films and struggles to see their behaviour as genuine, rather than a mimicry of something they have witnessed elsewhere (pp.86-90).

Individualism and the Neurological Condition in Ian McEwan's Saturday, continued

References

Afonso, A. (2015). Will the Labour party turn into a losing machine under Corbyn?. *Alexandre Afonso,* 17th August. Retrieved from http://afonso33.rssing.com/browser.php?indx=27819074&item=45

Carbonell, C.D. (2010). A consilient science and humanities in McEwan's *Enduring Love*. CLCWeb: *Comparative Literature and Culture*, 12(3). Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1425

Columbino, L. (2017). The body, the city, the global spaces of catastrophe in Ian McEwan's Saturday. *Textual Practice,* 31(4), 783-803. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2015.1126629

Giddens, A. (2010). The rise and fall of New Labour. *New Statesman*. Retrieved from https://www.newstatesman.com/uk-politics/2010/05/labour-policy-policies-blair

Green, S. (2010). Consciousness and Ian McEwan's *Saturday*: 'what Henry knows'. *English Studies*, 91(1), 58-73. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/00138380903355114

Hall, S. (2011). The neoliberal revolution. *Soundings*, 48, 9-28. Retrieved from https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/s48_02hall.pdf

Heffernan, R. (2000). *New Labour and Thatcherism: political change in Britain*. Baingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ishiguro, K. (2005). *Never let me go.* London: Faber and Faber.

Jackson, B. (2017) Free markets and feminism: the neo-liberal defence of the male bread winner model in Britain, c.1980-1997. *Rethinking British Neoliberalism.* University College London. 11th September.

Jordan, B. (2010). *Why the Third Way failed: economics, morality and the origins of the 'big society'*". Bristol: Policy Press.

Mardell, M. (2003) Is Blair a neo-Conservative?. *BBC News.* Retrieved from http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/2907115.stm

McEwan, I. (2005). *Saturday.* London: Vintage.

Mcnaughton, J. (2007). Literature and the 'good doctor' in Ian McEwan's *Saturday*. *Medical Humanities*, 33, 70-74. https:// doi: 10.1136/jmh.2007.000259.

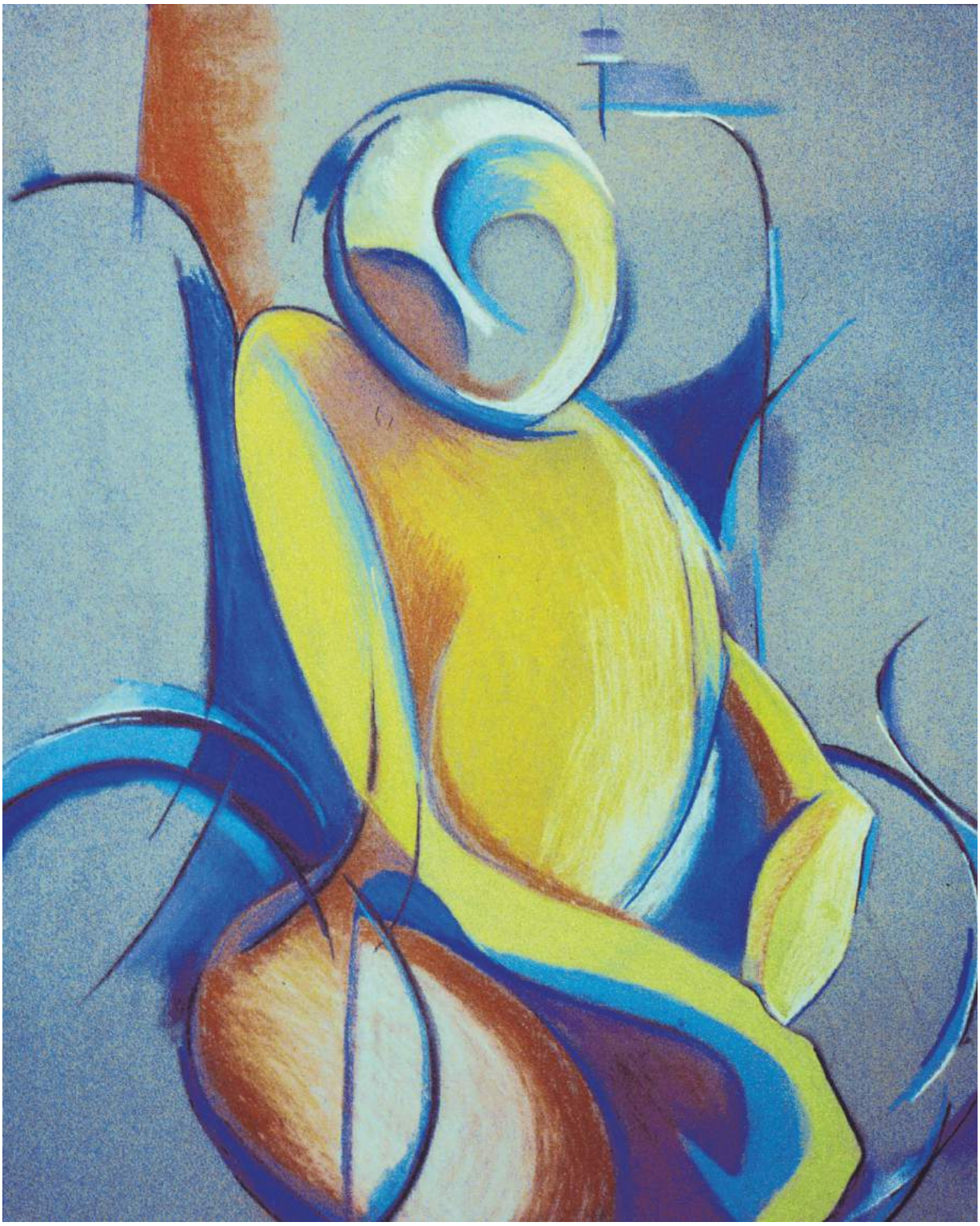
Murray, D. (2005). *Neoconservatism: why we need it.* New York: Encounter Books.

Rawlence, B. (2004) Tony Blair is the original neocon. *The Guardian.* Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2004/oct/23/foreignpolicy.iraq [Accessed: 01.09.2018]

Thrailkill, J. F. (2011). Ian McEwan's neurological novel. *Poetics Today*, 32(1), 171-201. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-1188221

Vice, S. (2003) Literature and the narrative self. *Philosophy,* 78(1), 93-108. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819103000068

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2019
ISSN 2472-0837



Self Portrait 1 | 1983 by Nancy J Willis

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2019
ISSN 2472-0837

The Future is Fixable: Convention and Ableism in Science Fiction

Susan Flynn, University of the Arts, London

Abstract: Science fiction blockbusters engage a vast audience, while their treatment of disability contributes to the social construction of disability. Hollywood acts as a global transmitter of cultural pedagogy, a purveyor of images and messages, which are not necessarily in the interests of diverse, marginalized, and exploited groups across the world (Frymer, Kashani, Nocella & Van Heertum 2010, p.1). A decade after its release, *Avatar* (2009) remains iconic in its science fiction treatment of disability, as it literally subjugates the disabled body with technology, in the project of creating a new, more vibrant world. By celebrating technological advances and reifying science, both in the diegetic world of the film and the film experience for audiences, *Avatar* draws the audience into complicity with the project of "fixing" disability. Biotechnology's conspicuous largesse proposes a simplistic and unrealistic "solution"; one that negates the agenda of the disability rights movement by undermining Social Model ideologies.

Keywords: Science fiction, disability, biotechnology, *Avatar*, Social Model of disability.

Introduction

In this age of organ transplants, stem cell research, artificial organs and cloning, fantasies of changing the body, modifying its abilities, dimensions, and appearance emerge with increasing frequency in the media vessels which drive and are driven by consumer tastes. Cultural vehicles such as film are increasingly seizing the disabled body as a narrative device for exploring the advent of biotechnology and on occasion, its relation to the military-industrial complex, e.g. *AI Rising* (2018); *Replicas* (2018); *Maze Runner: Death Cure* (2018); *Elysium* (2013); *Source Code* (2011); and *Iron Man 3* (2013). The commodification of organs, mechanical intervention, and computerized diagnostics ensure that medicine, health, and materiality are influenced by capitalist commodification. Illness, health, ability, and disability have become fields for corporate activity (Rose, 2007, p.11). It is this state of humanity and its frontiers that finds articulation in science fiction narratives. However, the persistent appropriation of the disabled body as a site of potential "repair" is troubling in an age where the disability movement is working toward creating a society in which all forms of bodies are treated equally. The central question that this paper asks is whether the use of biotechnology and disability in science fiction films undermine the Social Model of disability. Using *Avatar* (2009) as a case study, this essay illustrates how it is possible to excavate instances of ableism in the narrative, the conventions and the inherent ideological underpinnings of science fiction film.

Disability as a social construct

Although disabled people are a heterogeneous group, they share a common experience of oppression generated by ableist social structures (Shakespeare, 1998; Barnes and Mercer, 2003; Baker et al, 2009). For the purpose of this essay, "ableism" refers to:

> A network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and [is] therefore essential and fully human. Disability then is cast as a diminished state of being human. (Campbell, 2001, p. 44)

Because ableism does not focus on the construction of disability or impairment per se but draws attention to the production of a supposed ideal self and body (Campbell, 2009), it emphasizes that disability is socially produced. The social model of dis-

ability aims to avoid the risk of pathologizing disabled people, interrogating the status quo by seeking the "inclusion" of disabled people within extant social structures. But it also calls for an examination of how (unearned) privilege attaches to those who can conform to the supposed norm.

In examining such cultural systems, this paper draws on scholarship from the field of disability studies. Both materialists and poststructuralists working within that field have highlighted the roles played by culture and the media in constituting and re-constituting the exclusion of those defined as "other." Riddell and Watson have pointed out that "the oppression of disabled people has rested, in large part, on the imposition of negative and stigmatizing cultural identities" (2003, p.15). The cultural system is thus responsible for the creation and legitimation of ideas and beliefs which are implicated in many of the inequalities experienced by disabled people. Early disability/media critique, such as that by Colin Barnes, established connections between portrayal and ideology:

> Disabling stereotypes which medicalize, patronize, criminalize and dehumanize disabled people abound in books, films, on television and in the press. They form the bedrock on which the attitudes towards, assumptions about, and expectations of disabled people are based. They are fundamental to the discrimination and exploitation which disabled people encounter daily, and contribute significantly to their systematic exclusion from mainstream community life. (Barnes, 1992a, p.39)

The UK disability rights movement, within and beyond the academy, developed the Social Model of disability as a means of countering and displacing the ideologies embedded in the Medical Model (Barnes, 2007). The latter positioned people with impairments as individual "victims," who needed to be subjected to the professional "gaze" in order to be assessed, categorized, and treated. For Social Model theorists, disability is a trope, which is "wrapped around and over impairment" (ibid).

Avatar (2009)

Avatar is not only one of the largest-scale science fiction blockbusters that deals with disability, but is also one of the most financially successful films of all time (Dirks, 2014). Often blockbusters either elicit an elitist response or are omitted from critical discourse. "Their glibness and polish, their ability to excite the most accessible emotions seem to force them into a position that defies serious analysis" (Kolker, 1988, p. 237). Blockbusters are generally considered to be produced by and for "mass culture," which is diametrically opposed to art. Frederic Jameson, writing on postmodernism, attended to this tension when he wrote that:

> The erosion of the older distinction between high-culture and so-called mass or popular culture is perhaps the most distressing development of all from an academic standpoint, which has traditionally had a vested interest in preserving a realm of high or elite culture against the surrounding environment of philistinism, of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Reader's Digest culture... (Jameson, 1998, p.2)

Avatar is the most financially successful film of all time but inhabits the curious position of "mass culture's 'cheap' and 'easy' pleasures which consume, incorporate, and trivialize everything" (Petro, 2000 p.,584). However, the influence of a globally successful film, such as *Avatar*, with billions of viewers worldwide, must contribute in some ways to audiences' perceptions of the world, themselves, and others. This particular film is hugely relevant to disability research, having massive global reach while addressing the "fixing" of disability with the help of biotechnology. It has also made history with its innovative usage of CGI technology and as some critics would suggest, has taken 3D technology to its most effective level, now virtually swallowing the audience in its effects. It has also so far spawned three sequels, currently in production.

***Avatar*'s narrative**

For David Bordwell (1986), narrative has three possible aspects. It may be considered a representation; how it signifies a world of ideas. It may be a structure through which its components create a whole. Or narrative can be seen as a dynamic process of presenting a story, including the aspects of presentation and effect. This essay examines Avatar's "world of ideas," its narrative structure, and its consequent effect(s). *Avatar,* like classic Hollywood narratives, presents psychologically defined characters who act in accordance with the audiences' perceived expectations. The ideological and cultural expectations of the disabled character are based on the able-bodied viewpoint: the American Ideal occupies a normative position informed by four ideological principles: self-government, self-determination, autonomy, and progress (Garland-Thomson, 1997). The traditional or classical Hollywood narrative arc is based on a set of assumptions:

> The classical Hollywood film presents psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or to attain specific goals. In the course of this struggle, the character enters into conflict with others or with external circumstances. The story ends with a decisive victory or defeat, a resolution of the problem and a clear achievement or nonachievement of the goals. The principal causal agency is thus the character, a distinctive individual endowed with an evident, consistent batch of traits, qualities and behaviors. (Bordwell, 1986, p.18)

The disabled character is, thus, imbued with a set of traits which lead the audience to a certain set of expectations regarding character development and plot. Set against a background of able-bodied characters with "normal" bodies, the disabled body is thus made "peculiar":

> The disabled body, in contrast, is conceived of as requiring explanation-
> what went wrong, how can it be fixed and brought back to normalcy? Yet the questions "what went wrong and what should be done?" are based on the reproduction of the frame [constituting] disability as a problem' and leave this frame completely unexamined. (Titchkosky and Michalko, 2012, p.127)

The audience's expectation of the narrative, therefore, is preconceived, based on ideologically formed suppositions about the needs and desires of disabled people. Disability comes to us "already framed," mired in assumptions, and disability consciousness entails seeing disability as inherently an already-formed problem, located in individuals (ibid. p.128). The narrative of *Avatar* operates within the ideology of disability and, simultaneously, reconstitutes it. From the opening words of the film, the narrative identifies the disabled protagonist, Sully, as a character in need of explanation and "cure," one who, by his own admission, dreams of ability and agility.

Sully declares that his spine is "fixable" but not on his vet benefits. He makes a deal with "the corporation" to replace his dead brother on a mission in return for having his legs "fixed." The opportunity is not attributed to his own skills, but rather to shared DNA. The corporation is attempting to colonize a neighbouring planet, Pandora, whose indigenous population, the Na'vi inhabits an area rich in a mineral, "unobtainium," of huge financial value to the corporation. The financial cost of the project is continually highlighted, just as the cost of Sully's "repair" is repeated as his main motivation. The avatar program seeks to "get into the hearts and minds of the natives," thus the relationship between spending and acquiring is foregrounded. The new technologies of late capitalism propose a solution to Sully's "problem," offering him the chance to replace his dead twin, a trained scientist, in a project which involves his use of an avatar.

The corporation's mission is to populate the planet of Pandora with avatars; in sync with the human nervous system and grown from a mixture of human and indigenous DNA, the avatar provides Sully with

a new body and the chance to experience walking again. The intersection of physiology and technology is apparently seamless; we are subsumed into believing that it is possible and even easy, the incarnation of a new flesh being a normal scientific process. That the body is subjugated and effectively remade, that it is a site of the most intimate interference, being that of our thoughts and feelings, is made to appear a natural function of scientific advancement.

Propositioned by two "suits" who recruit him to replace his brother, the apparent indolence of the disabled Sully is manifested in his despondent slouch and casual "hoodie." The disabled twin is thus 'saved' from a life that, we are led to believe, would be without autonomy, self-determination and economic independence. The suggestion that the disabled twin is inherently lacking is related to American ideologies of the able body. Garland-Thomson refers to this ideal of the American worker in her critique of normalization:

> Nowhere is the disabled figure more troubling to American ideology and history than in relation to the concept of work: the system of production and distribution of economic resources in which the abstract principles of self-government, self-determination, autonomy, and progress are manifest most completely. Labor (...) equates productive work with moral worth, idleness with depravity... American individualism is most clearly manifest in the conviction that economic autonomy results from hard work and virtue. (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p 46)

Sully's disability is, in this way, a totalizing identity that defines and harnesses him. Wounded in action, he is apparently extraneous to military life. In contrast to the vigor of an active marine, his life has become a nightmare of immobility. From the very first comments, "Last night I dreamed I was flying," the audience is positioned to assume that the disabled Sully dreams of mobility and its attendant masculinity and virility. This is corroborated by the romantic love which Sully only finds as a walking avatar. Biotechnology allows Sully the traditional role of "super-crip," providing the means by which he can overcome the difficulties of disabled life. In a classic and predictable fashion, the super-crip status is bound up with citizenship; Sully becomes a good American when he takes the job on Pandora that simultaneously allows him to become "able." *Avatar* in this way displays a distinct neoliberal agenda, played out in the film's portrayal of biotechnology's conspicuous largesse. Crucially, the emphasis on Sully's duty to "overcome" supersedes any structural or cultural changes that would allow him to have an active and meaningful career. Sully's life as a (disabled) human is never depicted as appealing; he is apparently unemployable, alone and despondent.

Sully is first seen in the film emerging from cryosleep, encased in a capsule, and then struggling to control himself in zero gravity; he is immediately a pawn, manipulated and maneuvered in the service of the narrative. Effectively paralyzed in their capsules before they can remotely inhabit their avatars, the human avatar-drivers are essentially disabled before the dreams begin. This disability or paralysis is equated with death as the coffin-like pods evoke the iconography of early horror films, with the nightmarish specter of the lid slamming shut. The interruption of bodily integrity, where the person is "transferred" to another being, raises ethical and ontological questions of intercorporeality. At the mercy of the control panel, the avatar drivers have the ability to operate their avatars, only as long as the corporation allows. The body in *Avatar* is effectively colonized by big-business interests, just as in *Iron Man* (2008) and *Repo Men* (2010); in these blockbusters the body is a site of radical control and transformation. The Corporation has a use for the disabled body only in so far as it has useful DNA or critical body matter that suits the corporate needs of the enterprise. Critically, the body is a site which rejects disability in favor of ability, even at the cost of autonomy and self-reliance.

Sully shares the same DNA as his dead identical

twin but not his scientific expertise, a point which aggravates the chief scientist Grace. The narrative follows Sully's acceptance into Na'vi society and his eventual espousal of their values and lifestyle. By mating with their princess and taming the "baddest cat in the sky," Toruk, a dragon-like creature, Sully ultimately "goes native," turning against the regime which provided his avatar. The American hero has thus transformed the natives into servile beings, and through the implementation of his military skills, Sully leads the indigenous population into a counter-attack, ultimately resulting in a one-on-one battle between him and the colonel, Quarritch, who leads the attack. In this battle Quarritch is seen to represent not just military might but also technological advancement; he fights in a huge mechanical armored suit complete with missile launchers and advanced weaponry, whereas Sully represents the natural: vulnerable, in tune with his surroundings and reliant on the help of his loved ones. Sully is saved by his Na'vi wife, Neytiri, and decides to abandon his human disabled form altogether, choosing to become a full Na'vi and stay on Pandora.

The film's critique of scientific progress is conservative; on the one hand, it celebrates the possibilities of scientific progress, while it espouses the traditional values of family, community spirit, and morals. Unfortunately, the film's version of old-time values, natural harmony, and respect for nature does not seem to have room for disabled bodies; only as a fully functioning Na'vi does Sully find contentment, love, and acceptance. The traditional value system apparently espouses the American ideology of individualism; the hero is expected to make the best of his personal situation through hard work. Troublingly, in *Avatar*, this hard work is available to the disabled Sully only by the fluke death of his twin. Supposedly then, without such a mishap, the disabled Sully would have been denied the opportunity to fit into this American ideology.

Avatar and the science fiction genre

Avatar is firmly rooted in the science fiction genre.[1] Science fiction seeks to produce imaginary futures where the breakdown of society is alarming and the gap between the powerful and the powerless is a vast and ever-stretching chasm. The intersection of the body and technology is a recurrent trope; the body is remade (*Robocop*, 1987), remodeled (*Iron Man*, 2008) and transmogrified (*The Fly*, 1986). "As medical technology and genetic engineering have developed, so have the futuristic ideas of a society where "disability" is eradicated by the intervention of technology to cure and treat impairment" (Reeve, 2012, p.100).

Science fiction can be seen as a warning of what might happen when science goes too far. Biotechnological cures for disabilities can result in horrifying mutations (*The Amazing Spiderman,* 2012), Cyborgs can revolt (*I, Robot,* 2004), clones can overthrow the system (*The Island,* 2005) and economics can determine whether a person lives or dies (*Repo Men,* 2010). Science fiction always sees trouble with biotechnology: it is never a perfect advancement for humanity but always a precarious and dangerous relationship, which threatens to go wrong at every turn and disrupt the balance of power between human and machine. Machines have now made ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body. "Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert" (Haraway, 1989, p.176). The scope of biotechnology is so great that it invokes both fear and awe, seen in fictional representations as massive bodies that overpower humans (Springer, 1991). Scientific advances such as organ transplantation, stem cell science, and even blood donation require and create new sets of social relations as well as generating new ideas about what constitutes life (Rose, 2007). Science fiction blockbusters, designed to appeal to the masses and attend to their concerns, have much scope with the growing array of scientifically plausible futures: "Popular science, media representations, pundits, and futurologists all portray our own moment in history as one of maximal turbulence, on the cusp of an epochal change, on a verge between the security of a past now fading and the insecurity of a future we can only dimly dis-

-cern" (Rose, 2007, p.5).

The constant drive toward the optimization of the body, replacement body parts, assisted conception, gene therapy, and assorted other "procedures" are now so commonplace that science and technology are an everyday part of life and the aging process. So much of social interaction, education, employment, even leisure, depends on the categorization of people (healthy/unhealthy, able-bodied/disabled, old/young, fit/unfit) that the scientific intervention that is available or unavailable to us is more and more relevant (ibid). These concerns find articulation in the mass market media, in particular blockbusters that attend to the concerns of the masses. The science fiction genre repeatedly features disabled characters who are 'fixed' by technology: Robocop is remade, Anakin Skywalker gains an exoskeleton, the Six Million Dollar Man is engineered to have super-ability, Iron Man forges a heart replacement. The reification of science and technology combined with the disability of the hero place *Avatar* in the service of an ableist agenda; scientific progress is thus shown as engaged in the modification and "repair" of human beings. The supposed rationality of science is verified by the laboratory scenes. The wheelchair-bound Sully is given an "opportunity", and as he begins his new job he declares, "One life ends, another begins" (Scene 1). This is a reference to his dead twin and the life he will leave behind on Earth. In the futuristic world of science fiction, the alternative or "abnormal" bodies are excluded from the realm of the active subject; though their bodies may be "fixable," society still projects certain stigmas and expectations onto them. Thus, though the future may provide "cures," disability as a social construct still exists (Cheu, 2002).

Avatar's interest in the danger of biotechnology is therefore a generic necessity. The ambiguities of what it means to be human in an inhumane world or, to be inhumane in a humane world, are played out through the contentious relationship between human and Na'vi. The radicalization of human/alien identity forces the audience to question what it means to be human and to ask "what is a humane society?" A binary opposition is created between corporate "civilized" behavior and "natural" behavior, with the corporation ultimately exposed as an evil enterprise. In *Avatar,* the human body itself is colonized by the corporation, and science fiction's fascination with the future of surveillance reaches a pinnacle; the human is watched from the inside. Power structures thus become flesh as surveillance is internalized. Surveillance of the Na'vi, of their planet Pandora and of the avatars is heightened in the clinical environment of the corporate headquarters. Computer screens and electronic imaging are everywhere, the cold sterile world of futuristic science seeming highly controlled and managed by "lab coats."

Science fiction narratives regularly feature a tussle for power and showcase internal conflict for the characters. The characters' need to self-regulate, and as such be effective members of the population enacts the "bio-power" which Foucault spoke of in his Lectures at the College de France. As Foucault views the body as a highly politicized space, his analyses of the body are highly relevant to science fiction, where issues of power and control are frequently narrated. Science fiction lends itself to Foucault's institutions of "bio-power" (2003); science fiction narratives frequently involve a futuristic world where surveillance is endorsed by the powerful elite as a method of control and regulation. The surveillance of the Na'vi casts them in the role of the oppressed, the criminalized or the pathologized, just as Sully is literally subjected to internal surveillance. The link between the disabled man and the (pathological) native tribe is as such based on their lack of "normalcy."

Science Fiction, Biotechnology and Cyborgs

Science fiction is a means through which popular culture can grapple with scientific advances and work through the underlying fears about its potential power and imagined futures, replete with all that science has to offer and which we imagine it will one day offer. In science fiction films, medical tech-

-nology and scientific advances offer "perfect" bodies. *Avatar* explores the possibility of a radicalization of the mind/body binary, where the mind may be transferred to another body. Information technology has now been appropriated by biology, and biology, through molecular science, now breaks down the human into their elementary components. This molecularization of man is illustrated in the science fictions that break down and remake humans. In contemporary Western culture, humans have come to see themselves as "fixable" at the molecular level (Rose, 2007) and so films which work through these suggestions are highly relevant. The suggestion that science now has the power to "fix" various disabilities not only denies disabled persons their own subjectivity (they may not wish to be in any way altered) but also proposes that a homogeneous human race is the ideal. In the imagined future of *Avatar*, disabilities still exist but are "fixable" if a person can afford it: "They can fix a spine if you've got the money, but not on Vet benefits, not in this economy" (scene 1). This interplay of economics with science illustrates science fiction's continued concern with the power structures of the future. The wonders of scientific advances are always in the hands of powerful elite in the imagined future.

The avatars themselves are grown from human DNA mixed with indigenous DNA and are linked to the human nervous system. As such they are remotely-controlled human-made men and women: a peculiar type of cyborg. Haraway defines a cyborg as a "cybernetic organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (1991, p.149). The blurring of human and non-human boundaries provides narrative material that at once captivates and intrigues audiences, not least because of the social ramifications and the ontological intrigue they create, but also because the discourses of ability and disability are infinitely complicated by biotechnology's capabilities. When biotechnology restores functionality to Sully's legs, albeit remotely, there is no consideration of the cultural or social implications of this transition; therefore, society is effectively "let off the hook" in a typical Medical Model way. The notion of cure or normalization goes unquestioned; it is apparently assumed that a disabled person would do anything to restore full functionality to the body.

At the concluding scenes of *Avatar* we see a type of cyborg-human: Quarritch in his cybernetic exoskeleton. This is a familiar trope in science fiction; a cyborg, out of control and acting outside its remit, suggests a residual fear of technology. Technology's capabilities are awe-inspiring, in film this awe translates into huge bodies that overpower humans (Springer, 1991).

Reeve (2012) suggests that impaired people using assistive technologies are in some ways already cyborg due to their intimate associations with technology. Such technologies, coming with some new problems, are not equally available to all disabled people and therefore do not provide the universal panacea that science fiction films often propose. However, as Reeve points out, the relationships of impaired people and technology unsettle the everyday understandings of "normal" as technology has the potential to destabilize the categories of "disabled" and "non-disabled" (p.103). Avatar suggests that a life modified by technology is the preferred option for a disabled person. It also purports that technology can bring physical enhancement to the level of super-ability, rather than provide narrative closure by suggesting any cultural or structural changes that would resolve or alleviate Sully's apparent apathy.

Conventions

Avatar conforms not just to the generic conventions of the science fiction film but also to the larger filmic conventions of Hollywood, which form recognizable patterns and motifs. These conventions, through which we understand our place in the world and our purpose in it, constitute a sort of cultural mapping. They both reside in and are components of dominant ideologies. The familiar tropes of the lone hero and the country idyll, of masculinity and war, women and tradition, and of civilized society's attempted

appropriation of uncivilized lands are recognizable themes. In this way, films are replete with references to other films and reinforce dominant ideologies. The ideologies at play in *Avatar* rest on the idealization of science and the assumption that disabled people seek to be "cured." Idealizing science and technology's powers to "fix" disability presupposes the wishes of disabled people. The negative portrayal of disability and the use of the disabled body as a site of supposed improvement contribute to a cultural inequality: *Avatar* uses a disabled body to be permanently changed into a foreign "able" body; an escapist fantasy is thus created where a disabled body can be replaced. Viewed in this way, the film's use of Sully's body is a disturbing commentary on perceptions of disabled persons' lives.

Rebirth, Sleep and Paralysis

Avatar opens with the oneiric flight of the hero over the lush vegetation of Pandora, a visceral 3D experience which barely conceals a latent ableism; the disability disappears in the perfect state of dream as Sully speaks: "When I was lying there in the VA hospital, with a big hole blown through the middle of my life, I started having these dreams of flying, I was free. Sooner or later though, you always have to wake up" (Scene 1). The dream of release from the constraints of the body is all the more alluring when the body is disabled; such bodies have historically served as a device upon which artistic discourses have leaned (Norden, 1994; Shakespeare, 1994; Longmore, 1987; Darke, 1998; Chivers and Markotic, 2010). The film convention of the dream is employed to subtly illustrate that the aspiration of the disabled character is to have greater mobility and consequently, greater freedom. 3D technology effaces the space between audience and screen, virtually swallowing the audience in the technological dream. As Ross (2012) discusses the use of positive parallax (the illusion of space behind the screen plane) as it spectacularly depicts the exhilaration of flight: "Soaring through space… has historically been associated with progress and mastery, both literally and metaphorically, and thus can be used to structure the overall journey of a heroic protagonist" (Ross, 2012, p.211).

However, in *Avatar*, the exhilarated flight is tethered to an explicit wish for mobility, agency and able-bodiedness. Sully eventually learns to fly his own "ikran," only when he learns to trust his instincts and it is those instincts which are apparently unavailable to his disabled self. With the effects coming out to meet us, we are allowed to experience the dream-flight, and feel the rapid movement and autonomy of the highly agile. The audience participates in a technologically mediated sensation through their use of 3D glasses that brings them into the film-world, just as Sully participates in Na'vi life through the use of his sarcophageal control interface and the Na'vi connect to their world through their neural queues (Seegert, 2010).

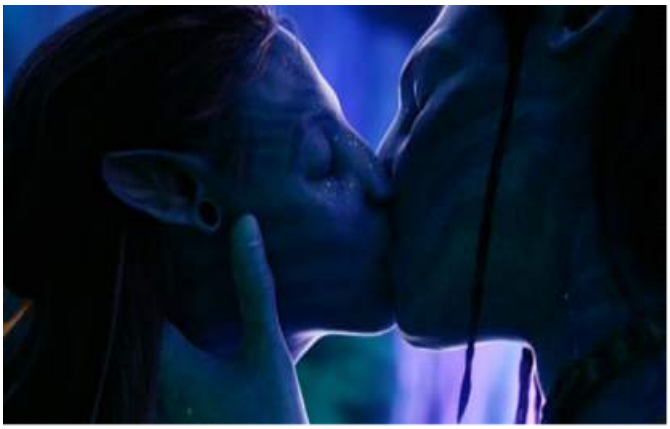
The dialogue of the opening dream sequence speaks of a character between two worlds: not the physical worlds of Earth and Pandora that feature in the film, but the states of existence which are ability and disability. Sully begins the film by looking back to the time he spent in the VA hospital, caught between the two states. Lying in the hospital, a "big hole blown through the middle of (his) life," disability was as such a personal tragedy inflicted upon him. Subjected to the medical gaze in this way, Sully's loss of autonomy, movement and potency as a serving military man led him to dream about freedom. In Foucauldian terms he was subjected to "dividing practices" (1982, p. 208). Following Foucault's theory, during the process of rehabilitation, the body of the paralyzed person becomes objectivized as paralyzed and the individual subjectivized as paraplegic, the paralyzed body becoming part of medical discourse. Rehabilitation thus is a form of power, categorizing the individual and compelling him and others to accept that categorization. The individual is, however, "divided inside himself," (1982, p.208) resisting the imposition of a totalizing identity (Sullivan, 2005, p.31). The opening sequence thus illustrates the Foucauldian power systems at play and the individual's struggle to accept the paralyzed

identity versus his previous able-bodied one.

The body in Avatar is used by big-business interests; it is a site of radical control and transformation. The Corporation has a use for the disabled body only in so far as it has useful DNA or critical body matter, as in other films such as Robocop (1987), Gataca (1997), and Source Code (2011). Social control is thus within and around the body itself. Sully's paralysis makes him the ultimate candidate for a new awakening—the transition from immobile to agile is not just physical but also existential; his awakening is an epiphany of sorts, which allows him to really "see". As we are told, in Na'vi language, to "see" is to know on a deep level and the phrase "I see you" means that "I love you." Having had the chance to "walk as one of the people," thanks to science, Sully is thus given new life. It is this new life which he ultimately chooses over life as a disabled human. The closing voiceover marks Sully's final choice to live on as an avatar; as he leaves the laboratory behind for the last time to become a full member of the Na'vi, he says, "It's my birthday after all. This is Jake Sully, signing off." The narrative journey from disability to reclaimed ability through the avatar body itself relies heavily on narrative conventions through which resolution is created.

The Country Idyll and the Sterile Indoors

Avatar employs the convention of the country idyll, casting Pandora as a pastoral haven where life is seemingly simpler, reminiscent of the North American frontier tradition. The countryside, in this case Pandora, conventionally represents natural law, as opposed to the civil law of civilization. In scene one, the military complex is framed by the lush vegetation of Pandora, its colors and textures at odds with the stark industrial Headquarters. Quarritch refers to the indigenous population as an "aboriginal hoard," showing the dichotomy between inside and outside, the civilized space and the uncivilized space. As the narrative progresses, it becomes apparent that the natural space of the countryside is more conducive to relationships, extended families and community spirit. In this way, science proposes a new, more connected world: the myth of connectivity which digital life proffers.



The country idyll's propensity for encouraging sexual relationships is seen in the mating of sully and Neytiri beneath the Tree of Life (scene 19).

The occasions of physical touch between the Na'vi is far greater than those among the humans in "civilized society"; the natural relationships among the Na'vi are contrasted with the unnatural civilized relationships between the humans. Below is a shot of the Na'vi as they join together in an embrace, creating a web of touch which suggests an interconnectivity and symbiosis. Their propensity to touch each other is at odds with the human value placed on "personal space" and propriety. This is complicated further by the issue of disability; the disabled character does not reside in the "natural"

sphere and so is placed in a position that is not conducive to touch.

The latter shot is constructed to convey a physical and psychic bond between the Na'vi, alluding to the connectedness between the tribe and nature itself.

While the human touch in the film is most often a handshake or hand on the shoulder, the avatar experiences not just sensual touch in the romantic sense but also touch from the entire connected community. The cliché of the untouchable, isolated disabled character, somewhat removed from normal human relationships, is therefore reconstituted and the contrast between the social relationships of the disabled character and the able-bodied character is acute. The issue of touch further suggests the sexual agency which is apparently denied to disabled Sully, but is open to his able-bodied alter-ego. The stereotype of the disabled person does not include an active sex life and in this way cultural attitudes diminish sexual agency for disabled people. As Wilkerson (2002, p.35) states, a group's sexual status reflects its broader social status. Sexual agency is not just the ability to make one's own choices about engaging in sex acts but it is also "a more profound good which is in many ways socially based, involving not only oneself as a sexual being, but also a larger social dimension in which others recognize and respect one's identity" (ibid).

Crucially, such a narrative closure is denied the disabled Sully; he effectively chooses the death of his human disabled self. In choosing (human) death, Sully abandons his (disabled) body. In Foucauldian terms, it is Sully's revolt against the bio-power that would subjectivize his personhood as "paralyzed": "[D]eath now becomes the moment when the individual escapes all power, falls back on himself and retreat, so to speak, into his own privacy. Power no longer recognizes death" (Foucault, 2003).

Sully recognizes that death will allow him to escape the totalizing subject position, believing perhaps that remaining in the country idyll of Pandora, he will have greater freedom from the bio-power that casts him as paralyzed. The country idyll does not accommodate a wheelchair, or any mobility aids which suggest mechanical intervention. The idyll thus accentuates the (able-bodied) material body which is part of nature and as such we see the dead Na'vi buried, covered in flowers and returned to the ground in a very simplistic ritual. There are no disabled Na'vi; the tribe is essentially one with nature, functioning as part of a network with all living vegetation on the planet. The suggestion is that the country idyll is so in tune with nature and that all creatures function perfectly in their given roles. This idealizing of a "natural" society suggests that the urban or "unnatural" society creates disabilities perhaps as a result of an unhealthy environment or ethos. The ultra-homogenous Na'vi is agile, fit, and mobile, apparently connected to a life-force that produces no impairments. The disenfranchised Sully is restored to the realm of the active subject when he "returns" to nature as an able-bodied person; the dystopian world is left behind as he embraces "natural" life on Pandora. It is there that he gains the power and the will to fight the political/military forces; it is there that order is eventually restored.

The film repeatedly uses the phrase "I see you" to express love. The use of this phrase epitomizes the narrative's involvement in active subject positions. The uncultured Neytiri "sees" Sully, but he is only able to say "I see you" after he returns to nature, experiences his epiphany and accepts his (able-bodied) new life. Not only does it ground the active subject position (the seeing character and also the audience) in a sighted position, it also assumes the position of able-bodiedness—the fully functioning, active position. Therefore, according to the narrative, "love" is only within the remit of able-bodied individuals.

The country idyll is represented simultaneously as a "natural" environment and as a savage untamed land, in a colonialist manner, with all the attendant meanings that brings. Pandora is reached by spacecraft, which is seen juxtaposed with the planet in an outer-space shot, a typical shot which re-

places the motif of the map in older (non-science-fiction) films. Colonial narratives such as *A Passage to India* (1984), *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) *The Jewel of the Nile* (1985) typically legitimize colonialism and its attendant stripping of national treasures by lending an aura of scientific progress, using images of maps and globes (Shohat, 2000). By using maps and later images of spacecraft and solar systems, some science fiction films suggest a geographical, scientific and hence respectable rationale for such plundering. The glorification of science and technology along with the supposed rationality of the civilized Americans is set in contrast to the lush tropical and seemingly untamed landscape of Pandora. American exceptionalism unmasks itself in the process; the American corporation is seen as bringing civilization to Pandora, "taming" the wild land.

The narrative critiques the industrial corporate society which invades lands for monetary gain while it provides individualized solutions for disabled people. The complexity of the ideological stance of the film is read by Rieder (2011) as highly contentious:

> The aspects of the capitalist world system and the US's dominance within it that Avatar repudiates—ecologically damaging resource extraction and arrogant militarism—are effectively erased, rather than criticized, reconceptualized or reformed, by the protagonist's whole body assimilation into the Na'vi, because this transformation is cast as a return to preindustrial harmony with nature. (Rieder, 2011, p.48)

Resource stripping is shown to be inherently disrespectful and damaging; this is achieved by the creation of pathos for the "natural" Na'vi and their lifestyle. The technology of the invading humans is set in contrast to the natural Na'vi, yet in neither culture is there room or respect for alternate or disabled people. The Na'vi, however, serve to remind us of a romantic pastoral past, the imagined pre-industrial past where values supposedly held greater importance. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin wrote in 1989, "The dominant discourse constructs Otherness in such a way that it always contains a trace of ambivalence or anxiety about its own authority. In order to maintain authority over the Other in a colonial situation, imperial discourse strives to delineate the other as radically different from the self." (1989, p.103) The Na'vi culture thus serves to remind the audience of a romantic past, of an innate "humanity" that is more sensitive, thoughtful, nurturing and in tune with nature.

In contrast to the idyll outside, science and technology are placed in a very particular and uniform setting to reinforce the methodical and highly complex processes involved in the "fixing" of or "creating" of an individual. The authority of "medicalization" is reinforced by the laboratory setting where the avatars are "reborn" and scientific knowledge effectively allows the rebirth of (able-bodied) individuals. Anders (2013) acknowledges that "medical disciplines and institutions both configure material and social contexts for the actions of individuals, but also discursively shape the identity of disabled people through the authority of scientific knowledge" (2013, p. 12). The medicalized setting therefore indicates an encoded meaning; the disabled character is in need of medical intervention or cure. Medical expertise has the power to intervene in the very personhood of the individual when medicine reinvents itself as the rational repository of truth. "Insofar as disabled people have become an object of disciplinary power, they have also become the subject matter of professional groups, whose discourses of expertise have defined and redefined that subject matter" (Hughes, 2005, p.83).

These practices' end result is a loss of agency for disabled people, and the cinematic re-telling of these procedures contributes to the perpetuation of this perception. The telling of disability in this familiar "professional" setting is part of the "encoded" message delivered by the director in his editorial choices. The audience recognizes the

supposed "universal truth" of this ideology of disability; we recognize disabled people in these types of settings as it is part of the ideological imaginary surrounding disabled people:

> One can begin to appreciate how, throughout modernity, disabled people's lives have been blighted and demeaned by a degree of supervision that is probably without historical parallel. Pathologized by medicine, imprisoned by disciplinary power in "special" spaces, normalized by strategies of rehabilitation: this is the modern history of disability in a chilling nutshell (Ibid).

This setting is thus necessarily at odds with the random and natural environment of the outside. The random acts of society or nature which result in disability are therefore precluded in the scientific setting. The setting thus corroborates the association of able as orderly, rational, and technically correct and disabled as disorderly, unruly, and chaotic. The "natural" setting of Pandora is in marked contrast to the grim enclosed of Headquarters. Nature is here used to suggest an idealized space with an almost mythological harmony, a nostalgic place with untapped potential.

Repeated shots of Sully in his sarcophageal control unit evoke the iconography of coffins and nightmarish horror films. Paralyzed within these units, the avatar drivers are "docile" bodies upon which power is exerted. These Foucauldian docile bodies are "policed" by a great many distinct regimes (Foucault, 1977, p. 153). Of all the avatar drivers, Sully is the most often seen in this setting; his paralysis doubled, he is a pawn of the power structures. The theme of containment is a unifying theme of disability-related films. Traditionally, in films featuring disabled characters, the disabled person is mostly confined to an indoor existence. In Avatar, the disabled Sully is seen outside just once, on his arrival at Pandora's headquarters (scene 1). Confined, as such, Sully suffers isolation from any disabled peers, while also being isolated and "othered" by his colleagues at headquarters. The confined indoor environment in which Sully exists is grey, sterile and medical. At the opening voiceover, when he speaks of his dreams of flying, he invokes the common theme in disability related films where the character associates outdoor open spaces with the freedom of movement which he lacks.

Military Masculinity and Repair

> *There is no such thing as an ex-marine, you may be out but you never lose the attitude. (Scene 1)*

Though he has been injured and now uses a wheelchair, Sully's self-definition is that of a marine. Apparently excused from active service at the beginning of the narrative, Sully is an "impotent" marine. His motivation for participating in the Avatar program is the "repair" of his disability, but this is tied up with his wish to be an "active" marine and by association, actively masculine. Indeed, when he becomes the "able" Na'vi he becomes a warrior and he begins a romantic relationship. This has the effect of subtly emasculating the disabled character, reconstituting the notion that disability desexualizes the person. At a first glance, Avatar may seem to offer an interrogative viewpoint on America's military might. However, further investigation reveals that it proposes America as the guardian of the free world, and indeed the universe, providing trained personnel who will overcome the threat of evil, even if it comes from within the establishment itself. The language of war which is utilized in the film to foster realism concurs with the view of American military leadership as altruistic; the "shock and awe" tactics of a "pre-emptive war," "fighting terror with terror," tether the military to the real world Bush administration (Alford, 2010). Popular media necessarily reference the times we live in and so blockbusters are replete with the concerns of war. The language of the military aggressors in the film clearly reference the Bush administration with phrases like "shock and awe," "daisy cutters," "pre-emptive war" and "fighting terror with terror." While adding to the

sense of reality in the film, such phraseology also serves to underline the modern image of the military man, whose robust aggression apparently calls for a robust physique. During wartime popular media glorifies tough, aggressive and robustly masculine soldiers (Myrttinen, 2004). Movies reflect and reinforce our ideas about ourselves and the conflicts we engage in. Militarized hypermasculinity helps to reproduce neocolonialism and gendered hierarchies in the nation state (Alexander and Mohanty, 1997) and similarly, it is a filmic convention that highly masculine men people the military and reproduce its highly contentious agenda.

You are not in Kansas anymore! (Scene 2)

Quarritch, who favors a pre-emptive strike to defeat the natives, alludes to the dream-world of The Wizard of Oz (1939) to suggest that the world of war is no place for dreaming but rather the cold world of survival tactics.

If you wish to survive, you have got to cultivate a strong mental attitude. (Scene 2)

Quarritch's utterance names strength, whether physical or mental, as the number one necessity for survival, the assumption being that he has no respect for weakness. His scarred face, heavy boots, and military fatigues suggest a tough, experienced soldier. Sully is an outsider in this military regime, lacking strength and agility, and as such produces intrigue as to his true value in a system that reveres such things. The biotechnology which is offered to Sully (thanks to science fiction's fantastic opportunities) is a conspicuous offer, as Anders writes:

> For disabled people, insofar as they are deemed to lack capacity, they are less available to a power that operates primarily on capacities. In this sense, incapacity would seem to simultaneously shield the individual from power and yet leave them outside the care of society—hardly a bargain. (Anders, 2013, p.10)

While on Pandora the military presence is made up of "hired guns," back home, Sully tells us, the marines are "fighting for freedom." Ultimately, even though the mercenaries are on Pandora to make money, Sully becomes the hero when he helps to save the Na'vi. The military presence on Pandora, though the military there is made up of mercenaries (scene 1), is hyper masculine. In the film convention, marines are highly masculine, traditional characters. The marine has taken his place in modern American mythography, and become a shibboleth that even in films, is replete with recognizable characteristics of loyalty, agility and perseverance, *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986), *Jarhead* (2005). Here again, movies reinforce ideologies of America. The image of the marine as a soldier who works for the common good is pervasive. Sully is a marine like so many of the other "hired guns." The marine is proposed in the media, particularly in film, to be the American working-class hero: loyal, vigilant, and highly agile. The marine is usually portrayed as a team player, who nevertheless, has such a strong moral code that his ethics are above reproach and so the audience recognizes that when he acts alone, outside the law, it is for the common good.

Sully alludes to the contradiction when he says, "I was a warrior who wanted to bring peace" (scene 23). The masculinity which is proposed to be the mantle of the military is denied to the disabled Sully, even though he sees himself as a marine. In this way, society imbues his body with meanings. The marine's stereotypical image as hyper masculine is represented in the comments by soldiers policing the exterior of Headquarters when Sully arrives by plane and wheels out onto the runway in his wheelchair:

"Check this out, man, meals on wheels."

"Oh man, that is just wrong." (Scene 1)

Sully's presence as a disabled marine clearly makes the other military personnel uncomfortable, as his disability does not fit in with their sense of identity. In scene 2, Colonel Quarritch tells the

military personnel, "If you want to survive, you have got to cultivate a strong mental attitude" (scene 2). The military's insistence on a strong mind and a strong body illustrates an ableist agenda. The disabled Sully clearly does not fit with the military's idea of itself.

Conclusion

Almost every culture sees disability as a problem in need of a solution (Mitchell, 2002). The generic opportunities of science fiction offer fantastic scenarios where disability can be "cured," a futuristic vision of humanity which is inherently malleable and controllable. Disability, in this scenario, is a context that a character must overcome: a deeply ableist approach. The textual analysis of Avatar illustrates that the film is involved in perpetuating ableist ideologies, through the (science fiction) possibility of eradicating disabilities. In its use of familiar conventions such as the country idyll, and military masculinity, Avatar relentlessly suggests that the disabled character's repair is the ideal scenario, which will bring romance, community and closure. The country idyll, community, masculinity, and romance are realms from which the disabled Sully is apparently precluded.

As this essay has shown, the film's narrative concerns disability vis-à-vis the technologies of the new millennium which seek to optimize life and transform those humans whose bodies differ into a manageable and productive body politic; the "normate" ableist assumption. This treatment of disability, with all its incumbent issues around ontology and biotechnology, has consequences for the social creation of disability, affecting how disabled people are viewed while simultaneously buttressing the hegemony of normalcy. Ableism is manifest in the familiar conventions used in Avatar and the lure of repair which will accommodate the disabled protagonist's re-entry into society and community. Engulfed in this spectacular and unquestioned drive toward repair, the audience and society at large are discharged from any responsibility. The science fiction body is suggested as an offering of the future, where the awesome potential of repair will be available to those worthy of the transformation and where society will be alleviated of any requirement to accommodate otherness. Science fiction, in this way, can itself be viewed as a tool of ableism.

Notes

[1] Some critics have placed Avatar with the genre of fantasy fiction, but in my opinion the themes and tropes of the film place it firmly within science fiction. Science fiction differs from fantasy fiction in that the imaginary elements are largely possible within scientifically established laws of nature. Fantasy fiction involves magic and other unscientifically proven elements and has become largely associated with medieval era allegorical tales such as *The Lord of the Rings*.

"The Future is Fixable," continued

References

Alexander, M.J. and Mohanty, C.T. (eds.) (1987). *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures.* New York: Routledge.

Alford, M. (2010). *Reel Power. Hollywood Cinema and American Supremacy.* London: Pluto Press.

Anders, A. (2013). Foucault and the "Right to Life": From Technologies of Normalization to Societies of Control. *Disability Studies Quarterly,* 33(3): 1-18.

Anderson, S. (1919). *Winesburg, Ohio.* New York: B.W. Huebsch.

Baker, J., Lynch, K. Cantillon, S., Walsh, J. (2009). *Equality: From Theory to Action.* (2nd ed.). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Barnes, C. (1991). *Disabled People in Britain and Discrimination.* London: Hurst.

Barnes, C. (1992a). *Disabling imagery and the media: an exploration of the principles for media representations of disabled people*. London: Krumlin.

Bordwell, D. (1986). Classical Hollywood Cinema: Narrational Principles and Procedures. In P. Rosen (ed.) *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, pp. 17-34. New York: Columbia University Press.

Bordwell, D, and Thompson, K. (2008). *Film Art: An Introduction. (*8th ed.). New York: McGraw Hill.

Campbell, F. K. (2001). Inciting legal fictions: Disability's date with ontology and the ableist body of the law. *Griffith Law Review,* 10: 42–62.

Campbell, F. K. (2009). *Contours of Ableism.* New York: Palgrave McMillan.

Cheu, J. (2002). De-gene-erates, Replicants and Other Aliens: (Re)defining Disability in Futuristic Film. In M. Corker and T. Shakespeare (eds.), *Disability/Postmodernity: Embodying Disability Theory*, pp. 198-212. London: Continuum.

Chivers, S. and Markotic, N. (eds.). (2010). The Problem Body. Ohio: Ohio State University Press.

Clark, T. and Lynch, J. The 10 highest-grossing movies of all time, including *Avengers: Endgame.* Business Insider. Retrieved from https://www.businessinsider.com/highest-grossing-movies-all-time-worldwide-box-office-2018-4?r=US&IR=T#2-titanic-1997-9

Corker, M. and Shakespeare, T. (eds.) (2002). *Disability/Postmodernity Embodying Disability Theory.* London: Continuum.

Darke, P. (2003). 'Now I Know Why Disability Art is Drowning in the River Lethe (with thanks to Pierre Bourdieu)'. In S. Riddell and N. Watson (eds.), *Disability, Culture and Identity*, pp. 131-142). Essex: Pearson Education.

Darke, P. (2010). No Life Anyway: Pathologizing Disability on Film. In S. Chivers and N. Markotic (eds.), *The Problem Body*, pp. 97-107. Ohio: The Ohio State University Press.

Davis, L. (1995). *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body.* New York: Verso.

Easthope, A. (ed.) (1993). Contemporary Film Theory. London: Longman.

Foucault, M. (1973). *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception.* Translated by A.M Sheridan. London: Routledge

Foucault, M. (2003). *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France,* 1975-6. A. Davidson (ed.), New York: Picador.

Frymer, B., Kashani, T., Nocella, A.J., and Van Heertum, R. (eds.) (2010). *Hollywood's Exploited: Public Pedagogy, Corporate Movies and Cultural Crisis.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Garland-Thomson, R. (1997). *Extraordinary Bodies Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Gomery, D. (1998). *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema.* New York: Routledge

Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks.* London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Haraway, D. (1989). A Manifesto for Cyborgs: science, technology, and social feminism in

"The Future is Fixable," continued

References, (cont...)

the 1980s. *Socialist Review,* 80: 65-107.

Hughes, B. (2005) What Can a Foucauldian Analysis Contribute to Disability theory? In S. Tremain (ed.), *Foucault And The Government of Disability*, pp. 78-92. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Jameson, F. (1988). *Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998.* London: Verso.

Kolker, R.P. (1988). *A Cinema of Loneliness.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Kriegel, L. (1987) The Cripple in Literature. In A. Gartner and T. Joe (eds.), *Images of the Disabled, Disabling Images*, pp. 31-46). New York: Praeger.

Longmore, P. (1987). Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures. In A. Gartner and T. Joe (eds.), *Images of the Disabled, Disabling Images*, pp. 65-78. New York: Praeger.

Miller, T. (2010). Why Do First-World Academics Think Cultural Imperialism Doesn't Matter When So Many Other People Disagree? In B. Frymer, T. Kashani, A.J. Nocella, and Van Heertum, R. (eds.), *Hollywood's Exploited: Public Pedagogy, Corporate Movies and Cultural Crisis*, pp. xv-xix. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mitchell, D. (2002). Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor. In S. Snyder, B. Bruegerman, and R. Garland-Thomson (eds.), *Enabling the Humanities.* New York: Modern Language Association.

Oliver, M. (1990). *The Politics of Disablement.* London: Macmillan.

Petro, P. (2000). Mass Culture and the Feminine: The "Place" of Television in Film Studies. In R. Stam and T. Miller (eds.), *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, pp. 577-593. Massachusetts: Blackwell.

Reeve, D. (2012). Cyborgs, Cripples and iCrip: Reflections on the Contribution of Haraway to Disability Studies. In D. Goodley, B. Hughes, L. Davis (eds.), *Disability and Social Theory: New Developments and Directions,* pp. 91-111. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Riddell, S. and Watson, N. (eds.) (2003). *Disability, Culture and Identity.* Essex: Pearson Education.

Rieder, J. (2011). Race and Revenge Fantasies in *Avatar,* District 9 and Inglorious Basterds. *Science Fiction Film and Television*, 4(1): 41-56.

Rombes, N. (2009). *Cinema in the Digital Age.* London: Wallflower Press.

Rose, N. (2007). *The Politics of Life Itself.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Ross, S. (2012). Invitation to the Voyage: The Flight Sequence in Contemporary 3D Cinema. *Film History,* 24(2): 210-220.

Shakespeare, T. (1998). *The Disability Reader.* London: Continuum.

Shohat, E. (2000). Gender and Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema. In R. Stam and T. Miller (eds.), *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, pp. 669-696. Massachusetts: Blackwell.

Smith, P. (2001). Terminator technology: Hollywood, history, and technology. In M. Tinkom and A. Villrejo (eds.), *Keyframes, Popular Cinema and Cultural Studies*, pp. 333-342). London: Routledge.

Springer, C. (1991). The pleasure of the interface. *Screen*, 32(3): 303-323.

Sullivan, M. (2005). Subjected Bodies: Paraplegia, Rehabilitation, and the Politics of Movement. In S. Tremain (ed.), *Foucault And The Government of Disability*, pp. 27-44. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Titchkosky T. and Michalko, R. (2012). The Body as the Problem of Individuality: A Phenomenological Disability Studies approach. In D. Goodley, B. Hughes, and L. Davis (eds.), *Disability and Social Theory New Developments and Directions*, pp. 127-142. Basing-

"The Future is Fixable," continued

References, (cont...)

stoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wilkerson, A. (2002). Disability, Sex Radicalism, and Political Agency. *NWSA* Journal 14(3): 33-57.

Filmography

Avatar (2009) Cameron, J. [Theatrical] U.S.A.: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.
Dracula (1992) Coppola, F.F. [Theatrical] U.K.: Columbia Pictures.
Elysium (2013) Blomkamp, N. [Theatrical] U.S.A.: Sony Pictures Entertainment.
Gattaca (1997) Niccol, A. [Theatrical] U.S.A.: Columbia Pictures.
I, Robot (2004) Proyas, A. [Theatrical] U.S.A.: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.
Iron Man (2008) Favreau, J. [Theatrical] U.S.A.: Paramount Pictures.
Iron Man 2 (2010) Favreau, J. [Theatrical] U.S.A.: Paramount Pictures.
Iron Man 3 (2013) Black, S. [Theatrical] U.S.A.: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.
Jarhead (2005) Mendes, S. [Theatrical] U.S.A.: Universal Pictures.
Metropolis (1927) Lang, F. [Theatrical] Germany: Paramount.
Night of the Living Dead (1990) Savini, T. [Theatrical] U.S.A.: Columbia Pictures.
Repo Men (2010) Sapochnik, M. [Theatrical] U.S.A.: Universal Pictures.
Robocop (1987) Verhoeven, P. [Theatrical] U.S.A.: Orion Pictures Corporation.
Source Code (2011) Jones, D. [Theatrical] U.S.A.: Summit Distribution.
Surrogates (2009) Mostow, J. [Theatrical] U.S.A.: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.
The Bride of Frankenstein (1935) Whale, J. [Theatrical] U.S.A.: Universal Pictures.
The Fly (1986) Cronenberg, D. [Theatrical] U.S.A.: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.
The Island (2005) Bay, M. [Theatrical] U.S.A.: Dreamworks Distribution.

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2019
ISSN 2472-0837

It's Okay to Stare: Visual and Unseen Disabilities in Comic Book Super Heroes

Brett Butler, Morgan State University

Abstract: Since their inception in the 1930s, comic books and graphic novels featuring superheroes have reflected innumerable elements of science fiction, from space travel to technological human augmentation. Similar to other works of science fiction, and all literature in general, disabled characters are either underrepresented or misrepresented. In comic books and graphic novels, disabled characters tend to be villains whose disabilities and deformities represent their inner ugliness and evilness, or they are pathetic background characters meant to be saved by the able-bodied hero. Most research conducted on the topic of representations of disabilities in comic books focuses on the same five heroes and a slew of villains and side characters, often analyzing only the most "visible" disabilities.

This article builds on the theories of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Leonard Davis, and others to evaluate representations of disabilities in comic book heroes. Then, it challenges existing theories of disabilities in comic books as proposed by José Alaniz, by broadening the scope of disability studies as they apply to comic books and graphic novels. Next, it demonstrates the problematic nature of disabled superheroes being "cured" or "fixed", suggesting that heroes cannot be both disabled and heroic (in a traditional sense). Finally, it expounds on the different ways writers and artists treat heroes with "visible" disabilities such as paraplegia or blindness versus "unseen" disabilities such as deafness and substance addiction.

Keywords: disabilities studies, cure, superhero, visible disabilities, invisible disabilities, freak shows

In June 1923, Jor-El stood in his laboratory as his home planet Krypton quaked and collapsed all around him. In his arms, he held his only child Kal-El, a son whom he would not allow to die with Krypton. He placed Kal-El in a spacecraft and launched it on a trajectory toward Earth, where Kal-El would discover incredible powers and grow up to be Earth's greatest champion: Superman.

Superman—and just about every other Golden Age comic book hero—represents classic Greco-Roman ideals of beauty and athleticism. They are handsome, intelligent, strong, and courageous. Even their most prominent female Golden Age counterpart, Wonder Woman, demonstrates beauty, strength, and cunning. Children read about these heroes, seeing in them everything they wanted to be. Maybe these children couldn't shoot lasers out of their eyes or create a car that transformed into a boat, but they could hone their brains in school and play sports to become physically fit. It took years before the image of the disabled hero would become more prevalent,

ushering in the Silver Age of comic books. Thus, disability studies in comic books predominantly tend to focus on characters from the Silver Age to the present. *Death, Disability, and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond* by José Alaniz (2014), perhaps the preeminent study on disabilities in comic books, illustrates this point. More recently, the collection Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives also focuses almost entirely on portrayals of disability from the Silver Age to modern manga. Whereas these texts and similar articles on the topic of disability in comic books and graphic novels do provide insight into and make irrefutable contributions to the field, they too are limited in their perspectives on disability. And although supporters of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) have expanded their understandings of which impairments constitute disabilities, much of the research on comic books and disabilities seems a bit dated in this regard.

This article contributes to existing scholarship by expanding the ways in which disability studies can

be applied to comic book super heroes. Primarily, it shows the influence of circus freak shows on both comic books and disabilities studies to demonstrate how the former was inspired by the incredible feats of the performers, and how the latter was inspired by the contextualized spectacle of disabled bodies. Then, it provides an overview of the most common comic book characters mentioned in disability studies as evidence that the scope of disabled superheroes in comic books is myopic and limited despite the availability of numerous unstudied superheroes. Next, it explains how comic book artists and writers portray visible disabilities in superheroes, and shows how these visible disabilities have become the crux of disability studies in comic books. Doing so is problematic insofar as this over-emphasis on visible disabilities obscures and overwhelmingly eclipses critical consideration of invisible disabilities. Finally, it presents comic book superheroes who have been overlooked in disability studies because their disabilities are predominately invisible. Analyzing these overlooked characters emphasizes the need for scholars to expand their narrow focus by transcending the visible, physical disabilities most commonly studied. Recognizing portrayals of invisible disabilities in comic books will not only shine a light on unseen (and unrecognized) portrayals of disabilities in the medium, but may also open the door for continuing scholarship on unseen disabilities more broadly.

Origin Stories and the Circus

Both comic book authors and scholars of disabilities studies have found inspiration in different aspects of late-19th-Century/early-20th-Century freak shows. On one hand, comic book authors were infatuated with the daring performers of the freak shows. Authors such as Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster modeled Superman after the sideshow strongman in both feats and costume (Roberson, 2017). In the original stories of Superman, the hero could not fly or freeze people with his breath. Instead, he demonstrated superhuman feats of strength, speed, and general athleticism. Later characters such as Robin (Dick Grayson), Deadman, Hawkeye, and Mister Miracle were all circus performers before they became superheroes as well. Both Robin and Deadman were acrobats whose death-defying trapeze acts led to tragedy; Hawkeye was a circus sharp-shooter; and Mister Miracle was an escape artist.

On the other hand, disability scholars were inspired to humanize and normalize images of side-show "freaks" who had been advertised to defy nature and horrify onlookers. Historically, these "freaks" were placed on display to inspire curiosity and fear, promoted by circus barkers who presented the disabled as alien or inhuman, exotic, and sometimes threatening. Theorists such as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, in her book *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Disability in American Culture and Literature*, analyze representations of freak show attractions who (dissimilar to the heroically portrayed strongman, acrobats, sharp-shooters, etc.) were born with what were considered to be deformities or abnormalities. In this work, Garland-Thomson examines how freak shows showcased disabled individuals and put them on display: "The century-long heyday of American freak shows represented the dramatic resurgence of the tradition of publicly displaying and reading extraordinary bodies" (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p.58). The display of abnormal figures was intended to create an uneasiness in the crowd of onlookers by shocking them with bodies they were not used to seeing. Garland-Thomson accordingly notes that "Scrupulously described, interpreted, and displayed, the bodies of the severely congenitally disabled have always functioned as icons upon which people discharge their anxieties, convictions, and fantasies" (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p.56). From Garland-Thomson' description, one can imagine a connection not only between performers and artists, but also between freak show audiences and comic book readers. Both audiences and readers are given fantastical descriptions of extraordinary individuals. One account from the freak show

display, fished out of the ocean by sailors and rumored to be a part of the lost City of Atlantis. Its comic book equivalent may describe a man—born of an Atlantian queen and human father—who can breathe under water and command sea life. Upon watching these individuals, the audience/reader is invited to embark on a journey to a fantasy world where they can feel fear, pity, and courage—whether inspired by a circus barker's description of a "sideshow" or by imagining the world narrated in the comic book panels. Both scenarios attempt to appeal to the viewer's curiosity about "abnormal" bodies and incredible feats.

Whether performed or illustrated, then, each of these experiences creates a spectacle at which the reader or viewer is encouraged to stare; there is, however, a distinct difference between one's staring at a living human being and staring at their graphic representation. As Garland-Thomson points out in her article, "The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography," "By intensely looking toward the physical signifier for disability, staring creates an awkward partnership that estranges and discomforts both the viewer and the viewed" (Garland-Thomson, 2002, pp.56-7). In essence, staring at another individual, no matter how dehumanized they may be in broader society, can elicit a sense of guilt or shame in the spectator. Such emotions prohibit the spectator from analyzing the spectacle entirely or for too long because of a sense that it is "wrong," an admirable sensibility in the larger view of disability. Comic book readers, however, can stare as long as they want because the characters on the pages are fictional and cannot see them. By the late 19th Century, the invention of the camera made it possible for spectators to gaze at freak show attractions without fear, guilt, or shame.

The advent of the camera eliminated the personal relationship between the spectator and the spectacle, allowing the observer to view a photograph with the same impunity as the reader of a comic book. By doing so, a spectacle such as the freak show becomes devoid of any lingering humanity, essentially reduced to a flat, one-dimensional image on paper which allows for detached consumption. The spectator sees both as fictional creatures rather than as living human beings. In "A Means of Surveillance: The Photograph as Evidence in Law," John Tagg refers to the photograph as the "unreturnable gaze" (Tagg, 1993, p.64). In other words, the photograph provides its viewers with the opportunity to stare as long as they like without feeling the need to respect the social mores which dictate the appropriate parameters of the gaze. This prolonged gaze allows onlookers to analyze, scrutinize, and evaluate an image of a person just as they would the cover of a comic book. Comic books, though, contain more than a picturesque cover; they also contain pages of panels, each one depicting the actions, interactions, conversations, and thoughts of its characters alongside descriptive narration. Thus, comic books offer more than a prolonged gaze. They offer a complete portrayal of the characters. Such an insight allows scholars not only to apply theories of disability to the pages superficially, as Garland-Thomson and Tagg do with photographs, but also to apply them to analysis of the characters whose disabilities are not visible.

The Usual, Visibly Disabled Suspects

In comic book artwork, visible disabilities are, unsurprisingly, the easiest to portray. Characters with visible disabilities are depicted with either non-normative physical appearances or equipment signifying their disabilities. Thus, the reader has a constant visual reminder of their disabilities. For example, a quick Internet search of comic book characters with disabilities yields numerous results naming the same set of figures: Captain Marvel Jr., Thor, Professor Xavier/ the Chief, Daredevil, Oracle, Cyborg, Iron Man, and Hawkeye. All but one of these characters have some form of visible disability. Both Captain Marvel Jr. and Thor's human form, Donald Blake, walk with a crutch or cane (at least originally), while Professor Xavier, the Chief, and Oracle required a wheelchair.[1] As Matt Murdock,

Daredevil wears dark sunglasses and walks with a white cane to "perform" his blindness. Both Cyborg and Iron Man have futuristic upgrades from which they cannot detach themselves, whether it is Cyborg's 75% robotic body or Iron Man's hi-tech pacemaker with nigh-unlimited power output. The only character on this list who does not have a visible disability is Hawkeye, and this invisible disability has caused many inaccuracies in his story.[2] Primarily, many comic book authors forget that he is deaf because he, like most deaf individuals, has no visible markers denoting his deafness. For instance, although it has been established that he reads lips, he has responded to people speaking behind him as would a hearing individual. This article will return to the question of Hawkeye's representation later, as he does not represent the typical visibly disabled superhero.

When the most prominent disabled superheroes are visually disabled, authors and artists often portray them in stereotypical ways, many of which are condescending or offensive to the disabled community. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson identifies four visually recurring representations of people with disabilities in popular media such as television, internet, and press, and these representations are mirrored in comic books as well. According to Garland-Thomson, representations of people with disabilities fall into the following categories: as the wondrous, the sentimental, the realistic, and the exotic (Garland-Thomson, p.58). The wondrous "capitalizes on the physical differences in order to elicit amazement and admiration" (Garland-Thomson, p.59). The sentimental "produces the sympathetic victim or helpless sufferer needing protection or succor…" (Garland-Thomson, 2002, p.63). The exotic "presents disabled figures as alien, distant, often sensationalized, eroticized or entertaining in their difference" (Garland-Thomson, 2002, p.67). And the realistic "trades verisimilitude, regularizing the disabled figure in order to avoid differentiation and arouse identification, often normalizing and sometimes minimizing the visual mark of disability" (Garland-Thomson, 2002, p.69). Keeping in mind that comic book superheroes are the focus of this work, it is unsurprising that the wondrous and exotic are often associated with disabled comic book heroes (arguably erroneously) while sentimental and realistic depictions of disabled characters are few and far between; when they do appear, it is in such a hyperbolized way as to produce somewhat of a comedic effect.

The Wondrous

In comic books, heroes are intended to be larger than life and demonstrate attributes and skills that surpass those of the average person. Because of these attributes, all comic book heroes (regardless of ability) have some wondrous elements. As such, disabled superheroes are not wondrous because of their disability; they are wondrous because of their superhuman abilities. This superhuman representation of a disabled character is more concurrent with modern portrayals of the wondrous: the supercrip. According to Garland-Thomson, the "supercrip" is a disabled person whose actions seem to surmount his or her disability (Garland-Thomson, 2002, p.61). A real-life example of the supercrip mythology is Crossfit competitor Kevin Ogar, who, after sustaining an injury in competition that rendered him unable to move his legs, continued to train, releasing videos of himself performing feats of strength such as climbing a rope with his wheelchair (Ogar, 2015). The supercrip inspires awe by transcending people's expectations of a person's disability and by frequently surpassing the capacities of the "average," able-bodied person.

On the surface, the wondrous representation of disability and the supercrip archetype seem to align perfectly with representations of disabled comic book heroes. Upon further examination, however, we see that disabled superheroes in comic books often exaggerate the magnitude of their disability to hide their extraordinary abilities. Whereas supercrips transcend people's expectations in ways that seems to undermine their disabilities, disabled comic book superheroes often "play up" their disabilities to hide their actual super powers. For

example, Matt Murdock wears sunglasses and walks with a white cane to show the public that he is a typical blind person. This façade hides the fact that he actually maneuvers using a bat-like radar that allows him to see three-dimensionally. José Alaniz recognizes the problematic nature of the notion of the supercrip and the superhero, calling it a "pitiful identity [which turns] into a new 'super-persona' that defies pity" (Alaniz, 2014, p.33). Subsequently, Alaniz does support, at least in part, the notion that comic books do represent supercrips. He analyzes characters such as Iron Man, Thor, Daredevil, and Doctor Strange, all of whom have some visible disability. Then, he demonstrates how their "super-persona" negates their disability altogether by allowing them access to extraordinary abilities, from Iron Man's super armor to Doctor Strange's mastery of sorcery. The end result, he implies, is that these disabled characters transcend the wondrous—or even the supercrip—and, even in their "disabled" form are unable to be identified as disabled. Their superhumanity is meant to signify that they have effectively "overcome" their disabilities. Alaniz raises an interesting point here, but ignores the fact that these superheroes are still disabled, whether visibly or invisibly. Although they do have super powers that provide them abilities beyond those of the average, able-bodied person, Matt Murdock is blind and Dr. Strange is incapable of performing surgery. As such, they must still be identified as disabled. Although their super powers may compensate for their disabilities, the disabilities themselves are not negated or cured.[3]

The Sentimental

Just as the portrayal of the wondrous disabled figure is difficult to accurately identify in comic books, so too are portrayals of the sentimental. Typically, the sentimental represents people in situations where they are to be pitied for their disabilities. The nature of the comic book superhero, however, is to persevere with strength and courage, negating any pity the reader may have felt. Perhaps Ben Grimm provides the best—if not oldest—example of a sentimental portrayal that fails to maintain pity for the character in question. Grimm's origin story shows that he is a test pilot for and friend of the scientist Reed Richards and his family, Sue and Johnny. While piloting a mission through space, Ben, Reed, Sue, and Johnny are bathed in cosmic rays that imbue them all with super powers. For Grimm, the rays transform him into a hulking mass of humanoid rock, and he is dubbed "The Thing." His superhero name alone suggests that Ben Grimm has lost his humanity and should be pitied.

The Thing's new form renders him incapable of functioning normally in society. In these stories, the sentimental depiction of the Thing suggests to the reader that disabilities and deformities are comical. In addition to his "freakish" appearance, he has only four blocky, oversized fingers and a massive body; moreover, he weighs far more than an average human. He often struggles to fit through doors, breaks furniture, and fumbles to pick up glassware. He is also susceptible to depression and fits of anger because of his condition. After breaking a table or smashing the threshold of a door through which he is trying to walk, he often pouts while his friend, Johnny, laughs hysterically. Johnny, himself, often plays practical jokes on the Thing, which result in the Thing chasing Johnny. The way these scenes are portrayed suggests that the jokes played on the Thing are light-hearted and jovial. Not only do these portrayals suggest that it is okay to laugh at deformities and disabilities, but also that it is acceptable to play pranks on and poke fun at people with reference to their disabling impairments.

In analyzing the Thing and the scenarios in which he is placed, the problematic nature of depicting disabilities sentimentally is made manifest. Is the reader supposed to pity him for being unable to function in a society that is too small for him? Is the reader supposed to laugh at him for fumbling and being the brunt of slapstick jokes? Or is the reader supposed to cheer as he capitalizes on his strength and endurance to save people who would otherwise run from him in fear?[4] Treatments of the Thing

seem to suggest all of these, and none of them are positive responses to disabled figures.

Authors have ascribed a similarly comedic portrayal of the sentimental to Hawkeye. Although Hawkeye's disability is occasionally portrayed realistically, he nonetheless sometimes falls a victim to a similar comedic fate as the Thing. Such is the case in Faction and Aja's Hawkeye series. In their story, Hawkeye loses his hearing after being stabbed in the ears.[5] In addition to producing a quasi-silent issue (#19) that illustrates Hawkeye's deafness and demonstrates that he and his brother are fluent in sign language, Faction and Aja released Issue 11—what has come to be known in the comic book community as "The Pizza Dog Issue." In Issue 11, previous issues of the series are shown through the eyes and ears of Hawkeye's dog, Lucky the Pizza Dog. Issue 11 plays on the misconception that deaf people cannot hear at all. In this issue, Hawkeye's deafness is likened to what a dog understands. At this point in the story, Hawkeye's personal life is a mess, and he has three different women frustrated with him. As Lucky watches Hawkeye's conversations with these women, he only picks up a few words. Many of these words, such as "bad," "leave," and "goodbye," the reader can imagine are being yelled at Hawkeye; thus, he would be more likely to actually hear them, provided his hearing loss is not profound. The problem here is that much of the series is written with comedic undertones. As Hawkeye's personal life gets worse, the reader is conditioned to laugh at the mistakes he makes with what he does and says, unable to get out of his own way. These undertones throughout the comic also make light of his deafness as just one more thing in his life that is going wrong in some Charlie Brown-esque fashion… not that this depiction is unique to representations of disabled superheroes.

Many comic book heroes are fumbling or comedic, particularly when occupying the form(s) of their alter egos, whether it is Clark Kent (Superman) stumbling through a door, Barry Allen (the Flash) running late, or Peter Parker (Spider-Man) being picked on for being weak. The irony in these characters is that Superman is super agile, the Flash is super fast, and Spider-Man is super strong. Despite their nerdy personas, each one—even in their alter-ego—is fully abled. When contrasted to superheroes such as the Thing, whose rock form is incapable of turning human, or Hawkeye, who is still deaf when he is a hero, Superman, Flash, and Spider-Man are not pitiable. They are humorous when they stumble and fall simply because the reader knows that they are performing clumsiness and ineptness to maintain their secret. The humor is suddenly lost on a disabled superhero who cannot control his actions. Readers are then contextualized by the panels to respond one of two ways based on the tone of the scene. One, they can laugh, or two, they can pity the character. Either response reflects why the sentimental portrayal of disabled comic book characters can often do more harm than good.

The Exotic

Exotic representations are omnipresent in comic books; however, they are usually applied to villains to equate disfigurement with evil and corruption of the soul, dating back to the conventions of gothic literature (Alaniz, 2014, p.56). The list of disabled and/or disfigured comic book villains is endless: Dr. Doom, Dr. Oolong, Dr. Psycho, Dr. Connors, Dr. Langstrom, Dr. Fries (and that is not even all of the disabled or disfigured villains with Ph.D.'s). Most of these characters demonstrate their exoticism either by coming from strange, faraway lands or by anthropomorphizing themselves into humanoid bats or lizards. One has a difficult time, however, finding such a plethora of exotic representations of disabled superheroes in comic books.[6] Certainly, two of the X-Men fit this mold: Angel and Beast.

Both Angel and Beast are original members of the *Uncanny X-Men* (1963), although their deformities are portrayed differently. Angel was originally a teenage boy who grew giant wings that allowed him to fly like a bird. Beast was originally a large

man with almost ape-like hands and feet. Despite his wings, Angel has always been portrayed as beautiful, and even though he sometimes resents his wings as an obvious sign of being a mutant, he loves flying more than anything else. Angel's beautiful and angelic representation on the page "eroticizes" his disfigurement. When his wings are hidden, he is often viewed amorously by people on the street.[7] To add to his erotic and exotic image, Angel is a billionaire who drives expensive cars and owns properties all over the world, epitomizing classic images of the rich playboy. Contrarily, Beast has been a contradiction since his creation. He is a brilliant scientist in a hulking body with big hands and feet. Even though his "mutation" is not as dramatically visible as Angel's, he is readily cognizant of his deformity, which worries him so much that he creates a serum to "cure" himself. Instead of being cured however, he mutates further, growing sharp teeth and blue fur. Thus, he becomes (and comes to see himself as) completely savage and physically grotesque. As if to suggest that his further disfigurement is "ugly," Marvel Comics created a mini-series called Beauty and the Beast (1984) that tells the tale of the romance between Beast and another mutant, Dazzler, who is an attractive singer. The story seems to suggest that the only person who can see past Beast's disfigured appearance is another mutant. Incidents throughout the comic, however, suggest that Dazzler—who has no visible disabilities or disfigurements—does not like the attention she receives being with Beast. In one such incident, she runs from him on the beach because she does not like the crowd gathering around them. As if to promote the idea of Beast as a savage, the series shows an incident where Beast is injected with a serum that accelerates his mutation. This serum also effects his personality, which will align itself with his mutation. Beast, whose personality is defined time and again in the comic books by his intelligence and logic, becomes a bloodthirsty monster who tries to kill the woman whom he loves. Dissimilar to Angel, who is eroticized in his exotic portrayal, Beast is resigned to being a spectacle that is too savage looking to be loved romantically. As if to drive the point home, Beast tries to kill Dazzler in a theater setting designed by a ring leader who makes spectacles of disfigured mutants. Although the creative team is aware that they have created a comic book freak show, their treatment of the characters (not only Beast) seems to reinforce the savage nature of disabled people, suggesting that they are easily persuaded, violent, and unpredictable.

In the X-Men Universe of Marvel Comics, the Morlocks also seem to epitomize the exotic representation of disability. Some portrayed as heroes and others as villains, the Morlocks en masse are an ostracized group of mutants who live in the sewer beneath New York City because most of them are too physically deformed or disabled to pass as humans.[8] Many of them, such as the leader Callisto and her protégé Marrow, show such contempt for humans that they embody the exotic savage—too dangerous to fit into society. Their dwelling beneath New York City reinforces their exotic nature as they are alien to and distant from "civilized" society. Similar to the mutants in the Beauty and the Beast series, most of the Morlocks are portrayed as volatile people whose aggression represents a threat to humanity and mutants alike.

All of the aforementioned examples come from the X-Men Universe, a comic that was inspired by the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Despite its roots in advocacy however, it often falls victim to common tropes defining disabilities as well. The characters mentioned in this section are all "mutants," and in the context of the stories, the word "mutant" is synonymous with super powers and wild adventures. For some like Angel, his mutation draws negative attention from some but inspires awe and lust from others. For characters like Beast and the Morlocks, disabilities and deformities evoke images of the savage and unwashed. The end results are images of the exotic who are too far removed from "polite society" to be trusted or accepted. Such a portrayal is no different than a

disabled person being put in a cage as the circus barker warns the audience not to get to close lest they risk being mauled.

The Realistic

Finding realistic representations of disabilities is difficult because of the unrealistic nature of superheroes in comic books. The most that one can hope for is to see an extraordinary person with a disability that is portrayed in such a way as to maintain some sense of verisimilitude. However, realistic portrayals of disabilities in comic books rarely follow a social model, but rely heavily on a medical model. The social model sees disability as a societal construct created by how society is organized. The focus of such a model is to remove barriers so that people with disabilities can achieve independence. The medical model sees disabilities as a set of problems to be fixed, even if the disability is not causing pain or debilitating effects. The latter is troublesome in that it frames disabled individuals as being problems in society rather than a part of a society that is not designed with them in mind. Too often in comic books, writers, and artists use the medical model to portray disabled superheroes, even if these characters function perfectly well as superheroes with their disabilities.

The most shining example of this realistic representation gone awry under the medical model is the character Barbara Gordon (Batgirl). Barbara Gordon's early appearances in the Batman series show her as the mild-mannered daughter of Commissioner Gordon by day and the plucky crime-fighting Batgirl by night. As a heroine, she seems very similar to Robin in her light-hearted, jovial approach to crime fighting—seemingly unremarkable from every other teenage sidekick in DC Comics. This hackneyed characterization changed in Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke* (1988).

In *The Killing Joke,* The Joker shoots Barbara Gordon in her stomach, shattering her L1 vertebra. Although the comic was supposed to be a one-shot (no pun intended) in an alternate universe, fans responded so well to the story that DC made it a part of its regular continuity. Primarily, Gordon struggles with her disability, but soon realizes that her "photographic memory"[9] and technological intelligence make her a computer whiz, rivaling even the best Justice Leaguers. First as the intelligence expert in The Birds of Prey and then as the technological backbone of the Justice League, Gordon dons the name "Oracle." Her abilities as a computer whiz become central to her character, rather than her disability, which seemingly fades into the background as just another part of her person. This, of course, was a positive step in the representation of disabilities in comic books. As Lennard Davis contends in his article "The End of Identity Politics: On Disability as an Unstable Category," "The first wave of any struggle involves the establishment of the identity against the societal definitions that were formed largely by oppression. In this first phase, the identity...is hypostasized, normalized, turned positive against the negative descriptions used by those oppressive regimes" (Davis, 2010, p.301). In the case of Oracle, her presence as a hero is normalized. Despite her disability, she is viewed by the characters and the readers as a powerful hero who is paralyzed rather than as a hero defined exclusively by her (dis)ability. The Justice League relies on her to hack computers, to disarm security systems, and to operate satellites, among other things. In short, she becomes the backbone of the Justice League.

For over twenty years, Barbara Gordon remained a positive portrayal of a disabled superhero, but a retcon by DC in 2011 problematized this portrayal.[10] Batgirl #1 shows Barbara Gordon jumping (literally) back into crime-fighting in her Batgirl outfit. Further issues explain that she is given the ability to walk by a cybernetic implant that restored the nerves in her back. An article from *The Guardian*, "Batgirl Back on her Feet after 23 Years in DC Comics Reboot," aptly discusses the initial fan outrage to the running, ducking, jumping Batgirl. Beneath the title is the caption, "Fans lament end of paraplegic storyline as DC Comics announces all 52 of its series

are to revert to issue number one" (The Guardian, 2011). The article shows how unnecessary the retcon actually was, but even more disturbing is the response of Batgirl retcon writer Gail Simone—a well-known civil and women's rights supporter in the comic book industry. She states, "She's been removed from the action and danger for a long time. With this relaunch, she is still very much Barbara but she can reclaim part of her history and legacy with modern stories" (The Guardian, 2011). Simone's response seems to disregard the "history and legacy" of Oracle for the previous 23 years, one that normalized Gordon's disability and promoted her as a hero for being heroic, not heroic in spite of her disability. Simone's declaration that she will be placed back in the "action" dismisses the fact that she was a major part of the "action" as Oracle and perpetuates a false dichotomy between utility and ability.

As if she knew that controversy would surround Barbara Gordon's retcon, Simone made great efforts to disable Gordon in another way: paralyzing her with Acute Traumatic Disorder.[11] In the first issue of Batgirl (the New 52), Barbara describes her mental state after being shot: "Brave Barbara Gordon, victim of a brutal home invasion three years ago…Brave, brave Barbara Gordon. I panicked every time I heard a doorbell for months after" (Simone, 2013, vol. 1). By the next issue she sees a gun pointed at her abdomen and narrates, "The gun. It's…It's pointed right…right at the same… (spot the Joker shot me). He's going to shoot me. I can't. I can't. I froze. He pointed the gun at me and I froze" (Simone, 2013, vol. 2). In these panels, Gordon expresses that her Acute Stress Disorder is triggered when she is reminded of being shot. In following issues, Simone once again shows her awareness that Gordon's "cured" disability is controversial as she has the hero express guilt for being able to walk when so many other people are still disabled. Gordon asks herself, "Why do you get the miracle when so many others never will?" It suggests that Gordon should feel guilty because she was freed of her "pathetic" state as a disabled person. In essence, Simone takes a strong, normalized hero with a physical disability and replaces her with a more timid, ineffective hero who, afflicted with a form of Acute Stress Disorder, struggles to manifest the bravery required for handling the dangers of crime-fighting. This exchange, however, does not remove the sting of "curing" what had been, up until this point, a wonderful portrayal of a realistic disabled character. The transfer from a physical disability to a mental disability suggests that Simone feels justified in her decision so long as she can still claim that Gordon is disabled. Such an approach risks reducing all disabilities in comic books to interchangeable narrative props.

If Barbara Gordon's miraculous recovery were an isolated incident, then it would not seem so important, but the attempt to cure disabled superheroes is omnipresent across the genre, and evokes the specter of disability as disease. Gordon is just the most well-developed and popularized character to be cured. For example, Professor Xavier has used science, technology, and even his telepathic powers a few times to restore his ability to walk. He has used a serum as well as Shi'ar (alien) technology, and he has even possessed Phantomex, a mutant who can walk. The mutant Karma, immobilized by morbid obesity, is placed in a desert in another realm and emerges slender and fit with no explanation other than that she found a friend who trusted her.[12] Literally, in one panel she is obese, and the next time she is visible a few panels later, she is slender. The X-Man Angel has his wings amputated, only to appear a few issues later with new, more powerful metal wings that hurl indestructible, poisonous metal feathers. Adam Strange is blinded by a zeta beam malfunction only to have his sight returned on Rann when his wife uses the planet's futuristic technology to imbue him with a pair of functional, cloned eyes. Even Batman has his back broken by the luchador-inspired, super-steroid fueled Bane, only to miraculously heal himself so that he can protect Gotham once again. In most of these cases, the cure is met with fan approval. Despite Karma having emotional issues that lead her to

binge eating and obesity, fans celebrated the return of the lean, fit Vietnamese teenager whom they originally saw in her first appearance in the New Mutants graphic novel. Always having had the weakest powers of the original X-Men, Angel's new look is ominous and powerful; he becomes intimidating and fans celebrated the makeover. Even though Adam Strange struggles with blindness as he tries to fix his spaceship throughout the 52 series (2006-2007), his disability is merely a temporary obstacle for the hero to overcome, no different than a broken limb. Batman's broken back story hovers dangerously close to the image of the wondrous supercrip and the "overcoming narrative."[13]

For the able reader, these stories portray disabilities as temporary and "fixable." They convey the message that heroes overcome disabilities by curing them or cybernetically enhancing themselves or even willing their disabilities away. Ella R. Browning shows the problematic portrayal of this "medical" approach to disability: "The medical model of disability, historically, has been consistent with the ways that our society (de)values individuals with disabilities. The medical model of disability understands disability as something wrong with the body, something abnormal, something tragic, something that needs to be fixed" (Browning, 2014, p.98). This "fix" runs the risk of actually modifying a respected disabled character such as Barbara Gordon. For disabled readers, the message can be even more damaging: it tells them that they need to be "fixed" and seems to suggest that those who do not cure themselves are weak or somehow less valuable.

The Unseen Disability

As previously noted, comic books provide the reader with the chance to do more than gaze at images of characters. They function to make the characters' thoughts, lives, and conversations accessible. Thus far, this article has discussed the most commonly represented (and noted) disabled comic book superheroes, primarily because all of the aforementioned characters have visible disabilities. One needs to look no further than popular scholarship to understand the importance that scholars place on visible disabilities. For example, the works of Garland-Thomson focus predominately on photographs, videos, and advertisements, while the work of Elizabeth F. Emens states that these visible disabilities are "popular," and in "Constructing Normalcy," Leonard J. Davis affirms that ideas of "normalcy" are rooted in opinions of the physical form (Davis, 2010, p.4). *However, in Bending Over Backward: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions,* Davis refutes the notion of disabilities as purely physical phenomena, stating, "the body is never a single physical thing so much as a series of attitudes to it" (quoted in Alaniz, 2014, p.15). In this quote, Davis explains that disability is rooted as much in perception as it is in physicality. These perceptions in large are derived from the values and opinions of the society viewing the disabled. In essence, society plays a major role in determining what disability is, and this perception includes disabilities that are not physical or visible.

The 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) recognizes equal significance between mental, emotional, and physical disabilities. Still, scholarship about superheroes with invisible disabilities is scarce, despite the fact that comic books provide the perfect medium to study portrayals of superheroes with both visible and invisible disabilities. Despite their scarcity, some of the stories that reveal characters with invisible disabilities have become increasingly popular in their respective universes. Thus, this section expands existing scholarship to include portrayals of comic book superheroes with invisible disabilities. Such representations depict the multiple and overlapping sites of disability and attempt to acknowledge the distance between disabled experiences and performances of disability.

The challenge that comic book writers and artists face is how to portray characters with invisible disabilities through a medium that is predominately visual. Typically, they take one of two approaches: hyperbolize the invisible disabilities with stereotypical visual markers or attempt to portray them real-

-istically. The most prominent example of the former approach is the character Legion.[14] Legion is often a villain or anti-hero (depending on the story), and his character is typically drawn with hair standing straight up, wide eyes, and a creepy smile—visual markers of a stereotypical, hyperbolized "lunatic."[15] To add to the affect, artists often draw Legion with his head cocked to the side at an almost physically impossible ninety-degree angle. Moreover, he is often put in clothes that are either baggy and unkempt or hospital-issued, which mark him as an outcast from "civilized" society. His clothing suggests that he has escaped from a psych ward or that he lives on the streets (both of which are accurate, depending on the story). In essence, his mental disability is primarily made visible by the hyperbolized and stereotypical way that artists illustrate his lunacy. Thus, readers are discouraged from trying to understand the character; instead, they are conditioned to see him as dangerous, threatening, and unpredictable. Essentially, Legion is defined by stereotypes and his disabilities.

Although her disability is not as visually hyperbolized in her appearance, Jessica Cruz is no less stereotyped in her actions to showcase her agoraphobia. The 2014's introduction of a new Green Lantern, Jessica Cruz, set back portrayals of disabilities in comic books not only through a disability studies lens, but also through a feminist lens. Jessica Cruz receives a power ring when its original bearer dies. Dissimilar to the Green Lantern rings that operate based on the wearer's courage and willpower, Jessica's Ring of Volthoom operates off its host's fear and susceptibility. Jessica is chosen by the Ring of Volthoom because she has suffered from agoraphobia since she witnessed the murder of her friends years prior. Artists and writers display her agoraphobia visually by frequently putting her balled up in corner of a small room hugging her knees with her eyes squeezed shut, even in the middle of a battle sequence, as though people battling agoraphobia retreat to this position in any stressful situation. It is not until Batman, and later Hal Jordon (Green Lantern), teach Cruz how to cope with her anxieties that she becomes more consistent as a hero, thus reaffirming the medical model of disabilities, which implies that a character must be cured to be a competent superhero. Even worse, it reinforces the stereotype that a woman needs a strong, rational man to save her because she is weak and irrational. As if to assure the reader that Batman and Green Lantern have cured Cruz of her unseen disability, she gets a regular Green Lantern ring that operates off courage and willpower only after they help to "cure" her. The reader is then reassured that Green Lantern rings choose their wearer based on that person's ability to overcome fear. Even so, Cruz continues to struggle with agoraphobia as the defining characteristic of her character, and comic book authors use this defining disability to create cheap, sentimental plots that are damaging not only to portrayals of disabled superheroes but also to women in general.

Some invisible disabilities are depicted more subtly in terms of characters' appearances. Often these characters are portrayed more realistically and consequently, humanized. They become heroes with disabilities rather than heroes defined by their disabilities. And the disability most commonly portrayed in this realistic fashion is addiction to substances. Perhaps the most realistic aspect of the superhero-battling-addiction trope is the tendency for such characters to stay addicted through rough time-displacements and reboots. By remaining addicted through multiple retellings, the authors reaffirm the long-standing medical diagnosis that people cannot be cured of substance addictions. Thus, dissimilar to visible disabilities that get cured with technology or cybernetic appendages, addiction has no prosthesis or cure. This incurable factor reflected in comic book superheroes helps make the characters more realistic and diverges from the medical model previously described. The portrayal of these superheroes battling addiction falls into the more politically correct social model, perhaps because addictions such as alcoholism are more socially accepted.

The following section focuses on substance addictions in just a few of these superheroes to demonstrate how more realistic portrayals of invisible disabilities often follow a social model of disability, for a comprehensive list would involve a much larger undertaking than this article.[16] In Marvel Comics, both Iron Man and Ant-Man battle addictions to alcohol, and in DC Comics, Roy Harper battles an addiction to alcohol and narcotics. Surprisingly, all three of these characters remain superheroes despite their addictions. Even though the reader is made aware of their disabilities, writers do not constantly mention their addictions, so the reader sees a normalized hero whose disability is a part of his character rather than a defining characteristic. This completely contrasts the Green Lantern Jessica Cruz whose agoraphobia defines her character, leading to an extremely problematic narrative for representations of disabilities.

Invincible Iron Man 128 (1978) reveals that Tony Stark (Iron Man) has been binge drinking to deal with the stress of running a company, facing death, and being an Avenger. Visibly, he becomes more disheveled, until a friend, Beth, intervenes and sets him on the path to sobriety. Although he does display visible markers of alcoholism such as sleep deprivation, indicated by his disheveled appearance, these visual markers are not as comically over the top as those surrounding Legion or as stereotypical as those surrounding Jessica Cruz. As previously mentioned, his teammate, Hank Pym, also battles with an addiction that is possibly even worse than Stark's.

In *1000 Facts about Comic Book Characters,* James Eagan writes, "Hank Pym is surprisingly violent and abusive for a 'good guy'" (Eagan, 2019). In the Marvel Universe, there are two reasons for Pym's behavior. The first is a (mis)communication between the writer and the artist, and the second is to maintain continuity in Pym's story. As the myth has been told from comic book store to store, Hank Pym became a domestic abuser because of a communication problem between writer Jim Shooter and artist Bob Hall. The result is Hank Pym, tired, stressed and drunk smacking his wife, Janet, while she is in her miniaturized Wasp form. (Shooter 2018). Apparently, the script called for Pym to shoo her, but comic book art made everything bigger and more exaggerated, and in that moment, an Avenger became criminal. Marvel was quick to note that Pym had been drinking and used this drinking as a partial explanation for his abusive behavior. The other explanation, according to Eagan, is that Pym had suffered from bipolar disorder after the death of his first wife, Maria. From then on, Marvel switched the narrative to focus on Pym as an alcoholic who turns violent when he becomes intoxicated. Both Stark and Pym here have an unseen disability—addiction—one that is often portrayed in criminals in comics but not so much among heroes. When it is, it evades study, perhaps because something such as alcoholism has become almost "normalized" in a way that visual disabilities are not and produces a different kind of spectacle. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5th ed., Substance Use Disorder "is a cluster of cognitive, behavioral, and psychological symptoms...An important characteristic of substance abuse disorders have on the mind and body, they are listed under the ADA as a disability. These disabilities, many times, are completely undetectable physically, so they go unrecognized in disability studies. But the field could only benefit from conducting a more comprehensive analysis encouraging similarly realistic representations of invisibly disabled superheroes.

In comic books, it has been typical for street level heroes such as Daredevil, Punisher, and Batman to combat "junkies" in the street, and these criminals were usually dirty, dressed in rags, and illustrated with sunken eyes, making their disability more conspicuous. No matter how many times they were drugged or sprayed with hallucinogens however, comic book superheroes seemed immune to drugaddiction themselves. This immunity, however, changed in 1971's Green Lantern/Green Arrow 85. As a publicity stunt for the failing title, writer Dennis

O'Neil and artist Neil Adams took a chance and did the unthinkable: they made a hero a drug addict. In this issue, Green Arrow discovers that his ward, Roy Harper, has been selling Arrow's technology on the streets to make money to buy heroin. The cover of the issue alone is shocking for 1971, showing an aghast Green Lantern and Green Arrow walking in on Roy, a loaded heroin needle on the table beside him; he is covering the track marks on his arm with his hand, his costume still on except for his mask.

Interestingly, all three of the aforementioned characters have maintained their unseen disabilities throughout retcons, changes in timelines, and reboots. Even after two reincarnations of the DC Universe (New 52 and Rebirth) Roy Harper remains an addict. Issues of Red Hood and the Outlaws show his shame when he resorts to drinking alcohol to cope with his stress. He also defends longtime Batman villain Killer Croc when The Outlaws see Harper talking to him. Harper informs the team that Killer Croc is his Alcoholics' Anonymous sponsor, a role that, despite his homicidal tendencies, Killer Croc takes very seriously. In this moment, the reader suspends disbelief and sees a heroic side to Croc. Perplexingly, these characters and others like them with unseen disabilities are under-studied when many of their storylines show their disabilities as naturalized aspects of the heroes' lives, not positioned as what defines them, or what makes them sympathetic or wondrous.

As much as is possible, these representations of unseen disabilities are realistic. Dissimilar to the case of Hawkeye, writers remember that these characters are disabled, perhaps because of the moral implications associated with addiction. For instance, society seems to judge people battling addiction as being morally corrupt in some way, whereas it does not hold the same prejudice for the deaf community. Thus, the moral depravity associated with addiction seems to challenge the ethos associated with superheroes. Omitting that a character is battling addiction removes the metaphorical "demons" he is battling within himself. To remind the reader of these "demons", every now and again, writers and artists will show these superheroes in situations where they point out that they are fighting to maintain their sobriety. In the best cases, their struggles are secondary to their heroisms, and their addictions do not define them to the point of narrative prosthesis. If substance abuse can be represented this way (largely because of the omnipresence of alcoholism in our society), comic book artists and writers can certainly invest in maintaining and preserving the disability status of other disabled characters.

Disabled superheroes have been a part of comic books since the Golden Age, but their portrayals have often been problematic for various reasons. Because comic books are a visual medium, artists gave (and often still give) heroes exaggerated appearances to emphasize their disabilities. Donald Blake leaned heavily on his cane, Professor Xavier remained in his wheelchair day and night in every panel, and Freddy Batson stood knock-kneed and twisted. As scholars began to apply disability studies to comic books, they gravitated toward these characters with visible—often exaggerated—disabilities, but even the most comprehensive works on the subject have their shortcomings. They tend to be too broad-based with their analyses or focus solely on characters with visible disabilities. While it is important to develop research on comic book characters with visible disabilities, it is also equally important to analyze characters with invisible disabilities, lest they run the risk of being mis-portrayed or stereotyped. In either case, in-depth analyses of disabled characters and how they represent disabilities in general are often neglected, instead relying on common tropes such as those noted by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson: namely the wondrous, the sentimental, the exotic, and very rarely, the realistic. By identifying these trite portrayals, scholars and fans alike can challenge offensive, condescending, and inconsistent portrayals of disabilities, pressuring comic book creators to successfully meet the challenge of producing more realistic representations of disabilities on the page.

These more realistic disabled characters should not be defined by their disabilities nor should their disabilities be treated as diseases to be cured; rather, artists and writers should normalize disabilities, depicting them as parts of a character's identity instead of as apart from the character or otherwise as the character's defining quality. Perhaps, then, more heroes such as Oracle can emerge, not as a supercrip, sentimental figure, or savage, but as a well-rounded disabled character whom the reader values as an integral part of the story playing out on those pages full of picture panels. Doing so would normalize characters with disabilities and engage a new generation of fans who are open to the images of non-traditional superheroes.

Notes

[1] The past tense "required" is used here because both Professor Xavier and Oracle walk again in their newer incarnations at the time this article is written.

[2] Hawkeye has been deafened on two different occasions, the second to remind the audience that the character is deaf. This leads to the question, "How can a deaf character become deaf again?" The answer is simply that many storylines seem to ignore the fact that he is deaf.

[3] This article recognizes that there is a problem with applying the medical model of disability that displays disabilities as problems to be fixed. The medical model problem is addressed later in the essay.

[4] In *The Fantastic Four* comic book—especially in the 1970s-80s—onlookers often point and stare at the Thing and run from him.

[5] This, however, is not the first time that Hawkeye lost his hearing, as years earlier he put a sonic arrow in his mouth to cancel the effects of a mind controlling machine. He was later brought back from another dimension, comic book style, with his hearing fully restored. For once, a comic book hero was retconned, or revised, to regain his disability.

[6] This article recognizes the work of José Alaniz whose title *Death, Disability, and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond* suggests that death in comic books is sometimes treated as a disability. In such a case, characters such as Deadman and Red Hood would be exotic representations of disability; however, this article does not accept the premise that comic book death alone is a disability.

[7] *The Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe* '89 states that Angel can fold his wings until they are tightly flush against him, making them almost imperceptible beneath some clothes such as heavy jackets.

[8] The use of the word "human" here contrasts "mutant", which in Marvel Comics are two separate species, i.e. "homo sapiens" versus "homo superior."

[9] "Photographic memory" is in quotes here as it is a debatable term and considered by many neurologists to be erroneous. It is more accurate to state that Barbara Gordon may have high superior Autobiographical Memory (HSAM), which would account for her uncanny ability to remember exact details from a crime scene.

[10] Retcon is short for "retroactive continuity," which suggests that an author has changed a character's past to facilitate something in the present storyline.

[11] Acute Traumatic Disorder is used here in accordance with the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* as an umbrella term that covers conditions such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

[12] *The Fat Detective* by S. Gilman does well in applying the notion of obesity being a disability in the pulp genre.

[13] The overcoming narrative here shows the disability as an obstacle which the hero must surmount. These tales are different than the narrative prosthesis, where the disability is often eventually ignored or rendered innocuous. The latter would

It's Okay to Stare, continued

Notes, (cont...)

better describe characters such as Hawkeye mentioned in this article.

[14] The argument here does not deny that Legion is disabled, but he is often listed as having Autism and Multiple Personality Disorder. The prescription of these disorders are the product of a sensationalized image of "crazy" people in the 1980s when Legion was created. It is more accurate to state that Legion suffers from Dissociative Identity Disorder.

[15] This article focuses on the comic book character Legion and not his television counterpart 1) because the focus of the article is comic books and 2) because Legion's "insanity" in the television show is suggested to be a result of the Shadow King manipulating his thoughts rather than Legion having a mental disability.

[16] According to the National Institute of Health and the DSM, alcohol abuse, alcohol dependency, narcotic abuse, and narcotic dependency are types of psychological and physical disabilities.

It's Okay to Stare, continued

References

Alaniz, J. (2014). *Death, Disability and the Superhero: Silver Age and Beyond.* Jacksonville, MS: Mississippi UP.

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.)*. Arlington, VA.

Davis, L. J. (Ed.). (2010). The End of Identity Politics: On Disability as an Unstable Category. In Davis, L. J. (Ed.), *The Disabilities Study Reader.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Batgirl Back on her Feet after 23 Years in DC Comics Reboot. (2011). Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/13/batgirl-dc-comics-series-reboot.

Browning, E.R. (2014). Disabilities Studies in the Composition Classroom. *Composition Studies* (p.42, pp. 96-116).

Eagan, J. (2019) *1000 Facts about Comic Book Characters.* Retrieved from https://www.lulu.com/.

Emens, E.F. (2012). Disabling Attitudes: Law and the ADA Amendments Act. *The American Journal of Comparative Law*. (p.60, pp. 205-233).

Garland-Thomson, R. (1997). *Extraordinary Bodies.* New York, NY: Columbia UP.

Garland-Thomson, R. (2002). The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography. In S.L. Snyder & B.J. Brueg gemann & R. Garland Thomson (Eds.). *Disabilities Studies Enabling the Humanities* (pp. 56-75). New York, NY: MLA.

Gilman, S. (2002). T*he Fat Detective: Obesity and Disability. I*n S.L. Snyder & B.J. Bruegge mann & R. Garland Thomson (Eds.), *Disabilities Studies Enabling the Humanities* (pp. 271-279). New York, NY: MLA.

Lewis, B. (2010). A Mad Fight: Psychiatry and Disability Activism. In L. Davis (Ed.), *The Disabilities Study Reade*r (pp.160-176). New York, NY: Routledge.

McConnell, K. (2017). *Disability in Marvel Comics: The Necessity of Normalization.* Retrieved from https://comicverse.com/disability-in-marvel-comics.

Ogar, K. (2015). Kevin Ogar: Redefining Cross fit. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ru9QAXfdGag.

Roberson C. C. (2017). 15 Things You Never Knew about Superman's Cape and Costume. Retrieved from https://www.cbr.com/things-you-never-knew-about-superman-costume.

Shooter, J. (2018) Court-Martial. *The Avengers,* (1)213. New York, NY: Marvel Comics.

Simone, G. (2013). The Darkest Reflection. *Batgirl* Vol. 1: (The New 52) [Cartoon]. New York, NY: DC Comics.

Simone, G. (2013). Knightfall Descend. *Batgirl* Vol. 2: (The New 52) [Cartoon]. New York, NY: DC Comics.

Snyder, S.L. & Brueggemann, B.J. & Garland Thom as, R (Eds.). (2002). *Disabilities Studies Enabling the Humanities*. New York, NY: MLA.

Tagg, J. (1993). *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories.* Minneapolis, MN: U. of Minnesota UP.

Ware, L. (2001). Writing, Identity, and the Other: Dare We Do Disability Studies? *Journal of Teacher Education.* Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publiction/234588515. (Original work published 2001).

Whalen, Z. (2016). *Disabilities in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives*. C. Foss & E. Graves (Eds.). UK: Palgrave.

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2019
ISSN 2472-0837

"And then, you start feeling sharp" The first science fiction character based on a Paralympic athlete

Chiara Montalti, University of Florence & University of Pisa

Abstract: This essay is focused on discourses surrounding disability within an Italian science fiction novel entitled *BeBlade*, a unique publishing initiative written by Pierdomenico Baccalario (2018). The co-protagonist, in fact, is based on a young, wheelchair-using fencer and Paralympic athlete named Bebe Vio. After introducing the novel with respect to the science fiction genre, I will briefly illustrate the plot, and review how our character of interest is depicted. This article will examine some possible stereotypical representations of disability, employing the works of several disability scholars who deal in SF, such as Michael Bérubé and Kathryn Allan, to assess the novel's success as a work of disability literature and as a work of young adult science fiction. While stereotypical and problematic representations threaten to emerge through the figure of the "supercrip," as well as through the broader connotations of gendered representation throughout the text, this analysis aims to make manifest *BeBlade*'s radical potentiality as a disability narrative, particularly for science fiction writers and consumers engaged with disabled identities. The book examines various forms of disability, some typical and some unique to the story in question, with respect to "curing narratives" and to the oftentimes problematic intersections of futurity and disability – as outlined, for example, by Alison Kafer.

Keywords: Bebe Vio, stereotypes, representation, prostheses, future, Italian science fiction

Our metaphors, our tropes, our analogies: all have histories, all have consequences.

—Alison Kafer (2013), *Feminist Queer Crip*

What if we read contemporary science fiction stories as ethnographies of the future?

—Anne Balsamo (2000), *Reading Cyborgs writing Feminism*

In 2018, in Italy, *BeBlade* (by Pierdomenico Baccalario) appeared in print: quite a unique science fiction book – starting from the cover. The drawing shows a girl with short platinum hair, partially protected by a steel armour joint to a fencing foil. The most recognizable feature, however, is the girl's profound facial scars. The author has apparently based his science fiction adventure on a real person, the Paralympic athlete Beatrice "Bebe" Vio. She achieved many victories in the sport arena, but even those who do not watch fencing or sports in general do know about her. In fact, almost everyone in Italy would realize this without even reading the title. She is very popular on TV and social media—she ironically states, "I'm everywhere now [...], I'm tired of myself" (Sarto, 2018). The aim of this essay is to examine the representation of a character with disabilities as depicted in this novel—in this case, one based on a real person. Of course, disability rights activists and scholars have always held this topic close to their hearts; they "challenged (and continue to question) the representation of people with disabilities," in science fiction too (Ott, 2002, p. 31). Our attempt, then, is part of a long history (see for example Allan, 2013; Kessock, 2017; Wälivaara, 2018; Cheyne and Allan, 2019; Kafer, 2013, p. 207, n. 29). However, this analysis does not take account simply of a persona, but also of the real person involved. In order to do so, we will begin by briefly presenting the author and, of course, Bebe Vio—although she is famous in Italy, she does not receive the same media exposure globally. In the second section we will analyse the book more closely, presenting its most important characteristics. In doing so, we are able to contextualize BeBlade's character, and more generally the presence of disability throughout the work. In the third section we will focus on BeBlade and her companions, named the Funambulists, and we will learn about them and their disabilities. The book hasn't been formally translated in English yet, but I have translated the material quoted.[1]

In section four we will analyse the picture that emerges from the book. BeBlade's character will be examined through three lenses: the community she builds in the dangerous world she inhabits, and whether gender and disability stereotypes are reinforced or, instead, challenged. Lastly, we will consider a topic dear to feminist and disability scholar Alison Kafer: futurity (Kafer, 2013). How is disability imagined through the novel? How is disability represented in the future? We will also take into account advancements in prostheses.

Aside from disability scholars and more generally academic essayists, I will also make use of bloggers—both science fiction authors and general users. With regard to pop culture, in fact, I find it very useful to pay attention to the public perspective too, with special attention to minority representations.

1 - The real BeBlade and the author

Bebe Vio is a 22-year-old woman widely known for her athletic talent: she is a gold medalist wheelchair fencer who has participated in the Paralympics, World Championships, and European Championships. Affected by a severe meningitis at the age of 11, both of her legs from the knees down and both of her arms up to the forearms were amputated. Yearning to come back to her training, she was able to fence again after surgery, thanks to a particular prosthesis that starts from her shoulder—initially designed by her father (Great Big Story, 2018). Now, she is very popular on TV programmes and social media. She has posed for Anne Geddes in a pro-vaccination campaign and published two inspiring autobiographies (Romano & Vio, 2017; Vio, 2015, 2018). Her parents, along with many other contributors, founded a non-profit organization in 2009, Art4Sport, with the mission of promoting sport as therapy for kids with physical disabilities and encouraging the development of advanced prostheses.[2]

The author of *BeBlade*, Pierdomenico Baccalario, is

is a popular young adult novel writer that mostly writes fantasy fiction. His books have been translated in more than 20 languages. Inspired by Vio's story, he wrote *BeBlade: Bebe Vio e la sua squadra (in English: BeBlade. Bebe Vio and Her Team)*. It ended up being a sort of collaboration: he contacted Vio's family and discussed his project with them. Baccalario explains in the acknowledgments:

> I'd like to thank two of Bebe Vio's biggest fans, Mirco Zilio and Andrea Artusi, who had the idea of contacting her family and arranging our first meeting. Without the support of Teresa and Ruggero, Bebe's parents, none of this would have been possible. And, of course, thanks to Bebe's extraordinary passion for challenges[3] (Baccalario, 2018, p. 394).

We are justified in believing that Vio and her parents contributed to a certain extent (Baccalario 2018, p. 394; Sarto, 2018). In an interview with the weekly newspaper *Donna Moderna*, Vio recalls the book's birth:

> Not at first [it wasn't her idea, n.d.A.]. They reached me with the aim of writing a book on my life, but I did it before, so I preferred something different: a choral novel, inspired by the mission of our non-profit association, Art4Sport.[4]

In addition, Vio joined Baccalario many times during the book tour.

Baccalario transposed Vio onto a different, fictional, universe. Even though she's depicted on the cover, and the title directly refers to her, she is not the main character—she appears only in the second half of the novel. Juxtaposition of the fictional Vio (named BeBlade or Bebe) and the real Vio is not simply implicit: in addition to the subtitle, a short biography of Vio was inserted after Baccalario's own biography. Actually, Vio's biography is significantly longer than the author's, as he seems to prefer to stay in the background and let Vio emerge in every part of the project. To my knowledge, *BeBlade* is the the first disabled character in science fiction that is based on a Paralympic athlete.

2 - BeBlade: a survival story

In terms of literary features, *BeBlade* is part of a well-known book series in Italy, *Il battello a vapore*, written for a young audience from primary school onwards, or ages 11 and above.

Using an Italian publishing context, BeBlade represents almost an unicum; disabled fictional characters are very rare indeed, especially in young adult novels. An exception, for example, is *Alice nel paese della Vaporità* (translated, *Alice in Steamland*), a steampunk novel by Francesco Dimitri (2010). Alice loses an arm during the narrative and acquires a disability indeed—this differs from *BeBlade*'s plot in various ways, as we will observe.

BeBlade is not a hard science fiction novel; the level of science and technology is minimal as it appears only in some characters' tools and in BeBlade's prostheses. The story takes place on our Earth, but it is not clear in which country.[5] In this fictional Earth, the sea has been rising to a frightening extent, submerging the shores and entire areas. "The world," as a character recalls, "was decaying"[6] (Baccalario, 2018, p. 52). However, we don't have enough details to define it within a post-apocalyptic framework.[7] Temporally, it takes place in the future: *The Final Countdown* is recalled as "a prehistoric pop song"[8] (Baccalario, 2018, p. 32). Some aspects of the society seem to be different from the one we occupy now, but we do not have many specific details. We learn, for example, that voting begins at 15 years of age, almost no one eats meat, and living in space is a plausible option (Baccalario, 2018, pp. 45, 53, 384). However, the most significant change is in the moral realm; there are some people who consider a deadly game I will present below as acceptable.

BeBlade bears a small resemblance to the Hunger Games saga: there is a survival plot, and the characters, in spite of themselves, are involved in some kind of sport or game that is sometimes lethal (Collins, 2011). In a desert area, separated from civilization, Seven Hunters try to catch hundreds of prey, or Hares, who are teenagers. They do not know exactly where they are; they are in an abandoned city, surrounded by a lagoon—they name it simply "Here" ("Qui"). We also do not know the purpose behind the game. There is a group that enlists and rewards the Hares if they survive, or their families if they lose (and die). Some have chosen to participate knowing all the risks, but some appear to have been taken there against their will (Baccalario, 2018, pp. 163-164). The teenagers sent there decide how to play their game; if they give their weapons away, they become Hares and can live safely in their Nest. If they decide to fight the Hunters, they become Dog Heads and risk their lives daily. The Puppeteers represent the third faction: they were Hares who decided to help the Hunters in exchange for their complete safety. The last group, that we learn about the most, are the Funambulists. They live close to the lagoon, isolated from the others, who call them "the Wonkies" ("Gli Storti"; Baccalario, 2018, pp. 101, 160).

The main character is a girl called Mia. She lives with the Hares for a while, but is very curious to meet a mysterious character that everyone calls "BeBlade". She has been told that when someone among the Hares is hurt, his or her only chance is being saved by BeBlade.

3 - The Fictional BeBlade

BeBlade is Bebe's warrior name, meant to frighten the Hunters and their supporters. Although she is named BeBlade by strangers and Bebe by her friends, for the sake of clarity in this analysis, we will call the character BeBlade (and Vio when referring to the real person). We read rumours about BeBlade many times before we actually meet her. Apparently, she is the leader of the Funambulists, the kids she takes care of. They are all disabled. Her actions are described in the story below:

> She has already saved a lot of them, believe me. People given up for dead by everyone else. Sometimes you can meet one of them in the city: kids without legs [...] or without an arm, who climb better than me though [9] (Baccalario, 2018, p. 160).

"And then you start feeling sharp." continued

At this point, Mia asks herself if BeBlade could be a doctor ("she cures them", or "li cura", they say); however, the answer is quite surprising (Baccalario, 2018, p. 161). BeBlade is a fencer (Baccalario, 2018, p. 160). What kind of cure does she employ, then? Furthermore, as Mia and the Hares imagine her body; someone supposes she could actually be a robot. The other Hares insist that Mia be "prepared" for her encounter with this disabled individual: "Has anyone already revealed you *how she is*? [...] Something terrible surely happened to her. Her face is full of scars. And... her legs... she walks on two prostheses"[10] (Baccalario, 2018, p. 172, emphasis mine).

So we learn that the fictional BeBlade, unlike the real Vio, uses the well-known cheetah legs that look like "two parentheses, or two bird legs"[11] (Baccalario, 2018, p. 223); something that immediately recalls the sport arena. Used by Paralympics runners, these sprinting legs became famous because of Aimee Mullins—as she recalls, she was "the first one in the world" wearing them (Fashion & Physique Symposium, 2018). We can also perceive the closeness with another Paralympic athlete, Oscar Pistorius, named (and also self-named) "Blade Runner" (Pistorius, 2012).

Finally, Mia meets her. BeBlade is not a robot, but a quadruple amputee wearing cheetah legs and prosthetic arms. The disability narrative follows Vio's real biography; therefore, it is not closely tied to the story. BeBlade remembers that she contracted a disease at a younger age (Baccalario, 2018, p. 290). We never really understand how Beblade's character ended up in the arena, though. Every Funambulist has a disability as well, but they are all consequences of the battlefield. Most have amputations and, more rarely, blindness and severe burns. However, the Funambulists explain their resilience to Mia: "At the beginning it's very hard to accept you have lost a piece of yourself. [...] Then, you realise you can earn new pieces"[12] (Baccalario, 2018, p. 202). When Mia shakes BeBlade's hand, she realizes it is a prosthesis, even if "the fingers moved"[13] (Baccalario, 2018, p. 208). BeBlade takes them both off, and Mia is able to see her arms covered in scar tissue. She stares at BeBlade, "halfway between fascinated and horrified."[14] "They were the best prostheses, a few years ago... Yet they're high-tech lumps of plastic after all"[15] (Baccalario, 2018, p. 209).

Through the adventures they have together, Mia shows her fascination for the strange community they built. She also better understands the meanings of their nicknames. "Funambulists are wobbling on death. And I walk on blades. [...] We're Funambulists because there isn't a safety net below us. We're the wrong ones, whom no one would ever give a chance"[16] (Baccalario, 2018, pp. 213-214). BeBlade and her Funambulists train Mia; she learns to use swords, foils, and canes and becomes stronger. Her new friends, "cripple or hurt,"[17] meaning that they do not hold back in their training, and fight and exercise quickly (Baccalario, 2018, p. 225). BeBlade in particular attaches different weapons to her prosthetic arm to fight and shows how stable she is on her cheetah legs (Baccalario, 2018, p. 226). "And then", as Mia finds out after all her training, "you start feeling *sharp.*"[18] (Baccalario, 2018, p. 235). She feels like part of the team: "No matter what happened to us. No matter who we have been. We're here. Now. We're blades" (Baccalario, 2018, p. 281).

Throughout the novel, two Art4Sport goals clearly emerge: the importance of technology and the inspiration engendered by Vio's story (Baccalario, 2018, p. 290):

> When they take your legs away, you must learn to walk again. In order to do that, technology is compulsory. It's your only ally. A part of you. Only idiots regret what they can no longer do. There's always something new. A new invention. A new way[20] (Baccalario, 2018, p. 289).

The Funambulists are also called "the Association," which is modeled on Art4Sport youth athletes. After the conclusion of the novel, this juxtaposition ismade crystal clear: the statement "The Funambulists, the real ones" is followed by references to the

real kids from Art4Sport (Baccalario, 2018, p. 396). There is emphasis on the importance of teamwork, which is a character trait demonstrated both by BeBlade and Vio, and not only amongst the disabled characters. BeBlade has a strong bond with Mia and all the other Funambulists, but concurrently pushes the Dog Heads and the Hares to work together against the Hunters. "They divided us, don't you see?—she said—In gangs and factions, the Straights and the Wonkies. Everyone against everyone. And like this, we're nothing"[21] (Baccalario, 2018, p. 259). Vio, too, always stresses the relevance of a network of people, affinity, and bonding; that is both a personal characteristic and, of course, a feature of the Art4Sport association. From a biographical perspective, she explains: "You're no one, by yourself. When you think you lost everything, you must have someone to live for, to start living again. To me, it was my family, my friends at school and my fencing mates"[22] (Sarto, 2018). Vio then adds, talking about the book and the inspiration behind it, "The message is: together we can. BeBlade has a team of friends who come to the Prey's aid. Me and my family provide prostheses to amputee children"[23] (Sarto, 2018).

4 - Occurrence of stereotypes

The appearance of Vio's character traits in the fictional BeBlade makes the evaluation of stereotypes different than it would be for a purely fictional character. It is opportune to be tactful, because those of BeBlade's features that we will examine are possibly inspired by the biography and the character of the real Vio. Normally, we do not judge someone in terms of stereotypical narratives. However, we will consider communal, gender, and disability axes.

It is unusual in science fiction for an entire disabled community to be portrayed. This challenges the more established choice of depicting a single disabled character in a story. In *BeBlade*, the Funambulists develop a strong bond, building a community at first separated from all the other teams. They represent a microcosm within another microcosm. They accept Mia, after a while, but she is the only able-bodied member. Despite her difference, she feels more attached to them than to the other teams. However, although there is division among the Prey, they join forces as an alliance with common purposes, eventually. It is interesting both in the presence of so many disabled characters and in their leading role of building that alliance—perhaps, a metaphor for our non-fictional Earth.

BeBlade's role in the Association is similar to Imperator Furiosa's in *Mad Max: Fury Road*: she is proactive, strong, and also protective in a motherly way (Miller, 2015). According to Alisha Rogersen, female characters in science fiction are often represented stereotypically, individually constructed as an "empowered sex symbol," as "fragile" and "hyper-feminized" (often in a romantic relationship), or as maternal (Rogersen, n.d.). Even though this last feature is often a stereotypical female trait, gender representation for BeBlade is generally positive. She makes her own choices, motivated by the need to protect her companions and their final victory. The character shaped on Vio is not sexualized and is not engaged in a relationship. In fact, no one is. Whether the absence of romance is due to a mere preference to the young audience, to BeBlade's disability, or to a combination of all three, has not been determined[24] (Whittington-Walsh, 2002; Reeve in Goodley, 2016, p. 101).

The disability themes in this novel are more complex. As we already underlined, in science fiction literature "disability is often central to the plot" (Allan, 2013, p.7). This has led to "a small yet growing field of study" that focuses on intersections between disability studies and science fiction, and analyses the (often stereotypical) representations of disabled characters (Wälivaara, 2018, p. 1037). Regarding these frequent portrayals of people with disabilities, Michael Bérubé describes it as an obsession. This literary genre, then, "turns out to be populated by blind Daredevils, mutant supercrips, and posthuman cyborgs of all kinds" (Bérubé, 2005, p. 568). According to Kathryn Allan, "while SF undoubtedly recuperates stereotypical and biased views of the disabled body, the potential for reading—and imagining—

alternative human bodies as transformative in the genre is worthy of sustained critical attention" (2013, p. 8).

Pop references, including literary characters, have the capacity to produce original representations of people perceived as not conforming. These references inevitably had (and may still have in the future) a strong impact both on individuals and on the whole society. I believe they can change how people with disabilities—including LGBTQIA members, and many others who are rejected by conservative society—perceive themselves. This visibility, when respectful and without stigmas, can also help in "decoding" their experiences within a non-inclusive society. As Ria Cheyne argues, "narratives circulating in popular culture play a significant role in shaping wider understandings of disability" (Cheyne, 2012, p. 117). Disabled performative artist Petra Kuppers, for example, glimpses this opportunity in every visual presence of disability, from movies to theatrical performances. In her opinion, the curiosity produced in these spaces can spread respect and "ethical care" and open up "new opportunities" for disabled people (2006 p. 180).

As noted in many studies, plots involving disabilities often unravel in a similar way. According to Bérubé (2005, p. 570), disability "demands a story"; every disabled character revolves around their own disability. That means, often, a "curing narrative" through cybernetics or technology. Disability then disappears, leaving behind an enhanced character—likely a superhero (Wälivaara, 2018, p. 1046). As observed by Donna Reeve, it is quite rare to find proper representation of "the lived experience of disability and impairment" in science fiction cyborgs (Goodley, 2016, p. 101). "Application of technology," then, reinforces the widely discussed topic of medicalization within disability's realm (Allan, 2013, p. 8).

When a disabled character is not "pitiful," the narrative of the "supercrip" often comes into play, one which "describes people with disabilities as extraordinary." As Amit Kama neatly highlights, and Josefine Wälivaara separately affirms, the problem with supercrips—both in the sports arena (as the Paralympics) and in the fictional realm—is the focus on "individual achievements" (Wälivaara, 2018, p.1038). The supercrip narrative stresses personal willpower and empowerment, overlooking social and economic obstacles. If those with a disability simply try hard enough, they will certainly succeed, helped by technological enhancement. In opposition to the "supercrip" stereotype, disability scholars have sometimes avoided popular culture altogether. In Sami Schalk's words, "To dismiss outright all representations of supercrips as 'bad' is to disregard potentially entire genres of popular culture productions, ones which tend to have very large audiences" (cited in Wälivaara, 2018, p. 1038). Perhaps it would be more fertile to "critically engage" with disability stories, even when they include stereotypes, because they reflect "discourses of disability in society" (Wälivaara, 2018, p. 1038).

How does *BeBlade* fit in this framework, with respect to stereotypes and recurrent plots involving disabled characters? Firstly, disabilities are not the core of the plot; on the other hand, they are direct consequences of the perverse game in which characters find themselves. The only exception is BeBlade, as we already mentioned; the author, in fact, maintained Vio's real story, with a suggestion of a disease as the cause of her disability. Unlike Furiosa in *Mad Max*, whose amputation is never commented on, some details are eventually revealed in *BeBlade* (McSerf, 2015).

In a merely physical way, BeBlade wears prostheses in order to protect herself and her companions in the battlefield. There is nothing new in that, but she also appears without them when she is more comfortable doing things that way. This happens in spite of, for example, Mia's ambivalent reaction. In this way, she acts in a similar way to her real counterpart; Vio is not afraid to show herself socially without her prosthetic arms. In her relationship with her prostheses, BeBlade appears similar to Furiosa, who "seems as comfortable without her prosthesis as she does with it" (McSerf, 2015). In addition, Furiosa, like BeBlade, has neither "superpowers" nor lesser capacities

compared to able-bodied characters (McSerf, 2015).

The most interesting part, however, is how the acts to "cure"/"care" are intended. As stated in the book, BeBlade is not a doctor. Obviously she administers the few medicines available, but she relies on the same treatment she (and Vio) wanted as a child, and the one Art4Sport fights for: the possibility to play sports, have adequate gyms, obtain useful prostheses, compete, fight without excessive parental protection, lose, and win. Art4Sport's perspective—and consequently our storyline—relies on an original type of cure, which implies an act of taking charge and care of kids with disabilities that does not depend on the medical realm. As stated in their official site, they believe "in practicing sport as therapy for physical and psychological recovery of children and kids with limb prostheses" (https://art4sport.org, emphasis mine). Their aim then is to remove obstacles that disable kids who want to exercise.

Lastly, the character of BeBlade is certainly not pitiful, but rather close to the opposite: the supercrip. Yet, also considering the risks of this stereotype, this particular narrative reflects Vio's real person, her involvement with sports in particular. However, as P. David Howe (2011) explains very clearly, her high-profile media exposure could possibly be determined precisely by her "cyborgification" in the Paralympics arena; that is, the focus on athletes whose performances are based on technological aids such as wheelchair or prostheses.

5 - Imagining futures with disability

As stated in Feminist Queer Crip by Alison Kafer, it is important to consider the intersections between

temporal issues and disability. The topic can be divided in two main approaches. Firstly, when "disability" experience enters the popular imagination, the concept of "future" seems to disappear: "disability is what ends one's future" (Kafer, 2013, p. 33). Kafer explains the second approach:

> If disability is conceptualized as a terrible unending tragedy, then any future that includes disability can only be a future to avoid. A better future, in other words, is one that excludes disability and disabled bodies; indeed, it is the very absence of disability that signals this better future (2013, p. 3).

It is a popular opinion, then, that a "disability-free future" is desirable—and she challenges precisely this assumption in her essay (Kafer, 2013, p. 3). This kind of future can be achieved both with prenatal interventions and in "curative terms."

How is science fiction related to the future, or lack of future, of disability? There are profound intersections to be explored. As Kafer highlights, "Science fiction is full of 'imagined futures,' and disabled characters are common in such novels (even if they aren't referred to as 'disabled' within the narratives themselves)" (2013, p. 20). This absence of the term disabled, in fact, is true about BeBlade too; people with disabilities are usually depicted as cyborgs, and never named "disabled". It is a term from the real universe that doesn't enter in the fictional universe. As Katherine Ott, an historian of prosthetics clarifies: "cyborgs are divorced from disability" (2002, p. 21); that requires a change of status, both linguistically and regarding the frequently mentioned curing narrative. Moreover, Sharon L. Snyder and David Mitchell highlight how pop culture consumers often fail to perceive disabled characters; in fact, they "tend to filter a multitude of disability" and "screen them out of [their] minds" (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000, p. 51). In our case, even though the term is absent, it is impossible to miss disability.

However, returning to the main issue, when science fiction writers imagine futures, they often include people with disabilities—but they are rarely left uncured. "Futurity," as Kafer asserts, "has often been framed in curative terms" (2013, p. 28). It is important, then, that these "SF scenarios" are able to include original, different paths [...]: establishing [their] strong and positive presence" could ensure them a "collective, and ideally better, future" (Allan, 2013, p. 8).

Regarding this issue, it is interesting to consider Marieke Nijkamp's claims. Nijkamp is a writer and edited Unbroken, an anthology of thirteen stories starring disabled teenagers written by disabled authors (Nijkamp, 2018b). S/he proposes some advice to other writers on how to deal with disabled characters, and recalls what it is like to read books in which s/he cannot find proper representation[25]:

> As Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop wrote in 1990: "Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. [...] When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. [...] Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books." I grew up reading science fiction and I found no mirrors. Imagine what that feels like (Nijkamp, 2018a).

When this happens in novels soaked in "bright and infinite tomorrows," as science fiction is, it is even more hurtful. In order to make a "disability representation future-proof" (Nijkamp, 2018a), the most important steps are to know the issues the disabled community faces, and to acknowledge that not everyone is looking to be cured. S/he concludes the memorandum this way:

> The nondisabled future is fed by the common idea that technology will be a panacea that will eradicate impairments and, presumably, normalize brains. [...] Consider the thousand ways in which the most technologically advanced societies will still include disabled people (Nijkamp, 2018a, emphasis mine).

As we recounted, *BeBlade* is set in an arguably distant future. We are not able to make assumptions about its "actual" society outside the area in which characters are trapped, hence our conclusions concern only the microcosm living with specific dynamics due to the game. First of all, people with disabilities are actually imagined to exist in the future; as we said, that is pretty common in science fiction. This may be obvious for the Funambulists, it is but it is important to note the difference for BeBlade; she got a disease outside the arena, but her disabled body was not erased.[26] Technology is not used for cyborgification.

A separate thought needs to be outlined regarding the prostheses. Similar to our present prostheses—cheetah legs and possibly bionic plastic arms—the presence of these same devices in the narrative make us assume that progress has not been made in this field in that future. A future without advancement in every medical and technological field is hardly conceivable: the advance of technology is usually halted only in post-apocalyptic novels, when a large-scale event blows every comfort away. In our case, we do not know exactly how much the world has changed, but it seems that technology works well outside the arena. In fact, BeBlade received some prostheses, even though, as we said, they are not the ones we would imagine populating our future. We can simply suppose Baccalario wanted to make the real and fictional "Bebes" similar.

But if we want to dig a little deeper in the framework that emerges from the novel, we could propose two hypothetical interpretations. Prostheses are available, but not everyone chooses to wear them – disregarding the exceptions made by non-disabled people, and any framework of compulsory able-bodiedness. There also could be a second interpretation, more attached to our present: the Funambulists represent everyone—in particular kids—who *cannot afford* a prosthesis, or a technological aid. That is precisely one of the projects Art4Sport is striving for. Whichever is the case, *BeBlade*'s picture of disability in the future turns out to be uncommon.

6 - Conclusion

If we rely on Mitchell and Snyder's words (they refer to Americans in particular), we should acknowledge that we often "learn perspectives on disability from books and films more than from policies or personal interactions" (2008, p. 166). Hence, its represent-

-ation has great importance. On the other hand, "representation inevitably spawns discontent" (Mitchell & Snyder, 2008, p. 40). Every consumer of a product—whether it be books, video games, or movies—tends to decode a character or an experience through a larger framework, in order to draw wider conclusions about the society in which they live. Therefore, those characters live in fiction but continue to have consequences, such has having to "live" in real society. In addition, if there is general consent among disabled people on negative representations, the positive ones are "fraught with difficulty" (Mitchell & Snyder, 2008, p. 20). In Mitchell and Snyder's words, "The effort to represent is inevitably fraught with politics. The question of disability's service to 'negative' portrayals is profoundly complex" (Mitchell & Snyder, 2008, pp. 40-41).

We have assessed the handling of stereotypes and ambivalent representations, within the context of this complexity. Disability, we stated, usually "demands a story"; in BeBlade it's rarely explained, and rather simply lived. The novel skips the pitiful narrative and, regarding BeBlade's character, treats her more as a supercrip. We have, then, examined the second term of the "kill or cure" logic, that often "infuses popular film and television plots that introduce disabled characters" (Mitchell & Snyder, 2008, p. 164). As we highlighted, the "cure" topic turns, for once, on a non-medical procedure: BeBlade mainly administers care, training, and empowerment, rather than prostheses and drugs. We have not examined the "evil cripple" stereotype, because it is inconsistent with the novel under examination (Mitchell & Snyder, 2008, pp. 17-21).

In conclusion we argue that—given all possible negative representations—BeBlade offers up a "disability counternarrative." It might represent Allan's demanded (and already mentioned) "original, different path," presenting the effort to "expand options for depicting disability experiences" (Mitchell & Snyder, 2008, p. 164). It is also important to underline the target audience; young readers do not frequently encounter characters with disabilities.[27] To sum it up, the novel offers a picture coloured by a strong disabled community, an empowered young girl who knows how to fight, and a future in which all of them exist and matter. In addition, it offers that girl's voice, finely watercolored within the ink spilled by the author. From real Earth to fictional Earth and back, we are getting you loud and clear, Bebe.

Notes

[1] I have translated every quote from Italian sources.

[2] See Associazione Onlus Art4Sport: http://www.art4sport.org/.

[3] "Desidero ringraziare i due primi fan di Bebe Vio, Mirco Zilio e Andrea Artusi, che ebbero l'idea di contattare la sua famiglia per organizzare il nostro primo incontro. Senza l'aiuto e l'appoggio di Teresa e Ruggero, i genitori di Bebe, tutto questo non sarebbe stato possibile. E naturalmente grazie alla passione straripante di Bebe per le sfide" (original text). Zilio, Artusi and Baccalario are all members of a storytelling agency (named Book on a Tree).

[4] "All'inizio no. Mi hanno cercata per scrivere un libro sulla mia vita, ma siccome l'avevo già fatto io, ho voluto una cosa diversa: un romanzo corale, ispirato alla missione della nostra associazione, Art4Sport" (original text)." In Italian, with "romanzo corale" we mean a story with a lot of voices, with multiple points of view.

[5] Maybe somewhere in a Russian-speaking country. See Baccalario, 2018, p. 336.

[6] "Il mondo stava marcendo" (original text).

[7] Although disabled characters are frequently a strong presence in science fiction, post-apocalyptic novels are almost always an exception as characters with disabilities are often left behind to die. See for example Kessock, 2017.

[8] "...una canzone pop di quelle preistoriche" (original text).

[9] "Ne ha salvati già tanti, credimi. Gente che gli altri avevano dato per spacciata. Ogni tanto se ne

"And then you start feeling sharp." continued

incontra uno in città: ragazzini senza le gambe [...] o senza un braccio, che però si arrampicano meglio di me" (original text).

[10] "Qualcuno ti ha già detto com'è? [...] Le deve essere successo qualcosa di orribile. Ha il volto coperto di cicatrici. E... le gambe... Cammina su due protesi" (original text).

[11] "Simili a due parentesi, due zampe d'uccello" (original text).

[12] "All'inizio è molto difficile abituarsi all'idea di aver perso un pezzo di sé. [...] Poi ti accorgi che puoi guadagnarne altri che nemmeno sapevi di avere" (original text).

[13] "Le dita si muovevano" (original text).

[14] "A metà tra l'affascinato e l'inorridito" (original text).

[15] "Erano le migliori protesi esistenti, qualche anno fa. Ma sono pur sempre pezzi di plastica altamente sofisticati" (original text).

[16] "Funamboli stanno in equilibrio sulla morte. E io, sulle lame, ci cammino. [...] Siamo Funamboli perché non c'è rete, sotto di noi. Siamo quelli sbagliati, quelli a cui nessuno avrebbe dato una possibilità" (original text).

[17] "Storpi o feriti" (original text).

[18] "E allora cominci a sentirti affilato" (original text).

[19] "Non importa cosa ci è successo. Non importa chi siamo stati. Siamo qui. Ora. Siamo lame" (original text).

[20] "E poi, quando ti tolgono le gambe, devi imparare a camminare di nuovo. In questo, la tecnologia è indispensabile. È il tuo unico alleato. Una parte di te. Solo gli idioti rimpiangono quello che non possono più fare. C'è sempre qualcosa di nuovo. Una nuova invenzione. Un nuovo modo" (original text).

[21] "Ci hanno divisi, non capisci? – disse. – In bande e fazioni, i dritti e gli storti. Messi gli uni contro gli altri. E così facendo, non siamo niente" (original text).

[22] "Da sola non sei nessuno. Quando credi di avere perso tutto, per ricominciare a vivere devi avere qualcuno per cui lottare. Per me sono stati la famiglia, poi gli amici di scuola e i compagni di scherma" (original text).

[23] "Il messaggio è: insieme si può. BeBlade ha una squadra di amici che va in soccorso delle Prede. Io e la mia famiglia forniamo ai bambini amputati le protesi" (original text).

[24] On disabled character asexuality, see Whittington-Walsh, 2002 and Reeve, 2016. Whittington-Walsh, in particular, argues that disabled male characters are more frequently portrayed as asexual than disabled female ones.

[25] Nijkamp identifies as genderqueer and does not have a pronoun preference. I choose the 's/he' pronoun purely on personal preference, because I find 'they' less proper (see http://www.mariekenijkamp.com/musings/faq/).

[26] This erasure happens, for example, in *The ship who sang* (McCaffrey, 1969). See Kafer's critical analysis (2013, p. 112). It occurs even more frequently in disabled characters living in the outer space, where they are often treated medically and merged with technology; as the writer Larry Niven summarized it, "space leaves no cripples" (1965, emphasis mine). For a further analysis of both novels, see Cherney, 1999. He also takes account of the problematic intersections between cyborg theory and disability experience, in particular regarding the cochlear implant.

[27] For further insights, see Disability in Kid Lit project, dedicated to discuss "the portrayal of disability in middle grade and young adult literature": http://disabilityinkidlit.com/.

"And then you start feeling sharp." continued

References

Associazione Onlus art4sports: http://www.art4sport.org/.

Allan, K. (Ed.). (2013), *Disability in Science Fiction. Representations of technology as cure,* New York, Palgrave Macmillan.

Baccalario, P. (2018). *BeBlade. Bebe Vio e la sua squadra.* Casale Monferrato: Piemme.

Balsamo, Anne. Reading cyborgs writing feminism. In Gill Kirkup (ed.), *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader,* pp. 148-158. Routledge in Association with the Open University. (2000)

Bérubé, M. (2005). Disability and narrative, PMLA, 120 (2), pp. 568-576.

Cherney, J.L. (1999), Deaf culture and the cochlear implant debate: Cyborg politics and the identity of people with disabilities. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 36 (1), pp. 22-34.

Cheyne, R. (2012). Introduction: Popular genres and disability representation. *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, 6 (2), pp. 117-123.

Cheyne, R. and Allan, K. (2019). The Intersections of Disability and Science Fiction [Special Issue], Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies, forthcoming.

Collins, S. (2011). *The Hunger Games.* London: Scholastic.

Dimitri, F. (2010). *Alice nel paese della Vaporità*. Milano: TEA.

Disability in Kid Lit: http://disabilityinkidlit.com/.

Europe and Elson K. (Producer) (1986). *The final countdown.* New York: Epic Records.

Fashion and Physique Symposium (2018). Aimee Mullins in conversation with Lucy Jones and Grace Jun, Fashion Institute of Technology: New York. Retrieved from: https://archiveondemand.fitnyc.edu/items/show/915.

Goodley, D. (2016). Disability Studies: An Interdisciplinary Introduction, London, UK, Sage.

Great Big Story (2018, January 3). This Fencer Won Gold With No Hands or Legs. Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZoC8cZt4LVE.

Howe, P.D. (2011). Cyborg and supercrip: the Paralympics technology and the (dis)empowerment of disabled athletes. *Sociology*, 45 (5), pp. 868-882.

Kafer, A. (2013), *Feminist Queer Crip,* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Kama, A. (2004). Supercrips versus the pitiful handicapped: Reception of disabling images by disabled audience members. *Communications,* 29 (4), pp. 447-466.

Kessock, S. (2017). Disability erasure and the Apocalyptic narrative. Retrieved from: https://shoshanakessock.com/.

Kuppers P. (2006). Addenda, Phenomenology, Embodiment: Cyborgs and Disability Performance. In: S. Broadhurst and J. Machon (Eds). *Performance and Technology* (pp. 169-180). Palgrave Macmillan, London.

McCaffrey, A. (1969), *The ship who sang,* New York: Walker.

McSerf, (2015). Furiosa: Disability, Representation and Empowerment. *Serf's Bazaar on Staff*. Retrieved from: https://serfbazaar.wordpress.com/.

Miller, G. (Director). (2015). *Mad Max: Fury Road,* USA and Australia: Warner Bros.

Mitchell, D. T., & Snyder, S. L. (Eds.). (2000). Narrative prosthesis: Disability and the dependencies of discourse. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Nijkamp, M. (2018a), The future is (not) disabled. *Uncanny. A magazine of Science Fiction and Fantasy.* Retrieved from: https://uncannymagazine.com.

Nijkamp, M. (Ed.). (2018b). *Unbroken: 13 stories starring disabled teens.* New York: Farrar Straus Giroux.

Niven, L. (1965). Becalmed in Hell. *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction.*

Ott, K. (2002). The Sum of Its Parts: An Introduction to Modern Histories of Prosthetics. In K. Ott, D. Serlin, S. Mihm (Eds), *Artificial Parts, Practical Lives; Modern Histories of Prosth-*

"And then you start feeling sharp." continued

References, cont...

-*etics.* (pp. 1-42). New York: New York University Press.

Pistorius, O. (2012). *Blade Runner.* London: Virgin.

Rogersen, A. Female representation & stereotypes - Sci-fi/Fantasy films - Age of Ultron (2015) and The Hunger Games: Catching Fire (2013). Retrieved from https://academia.edu.

Romano, G. (Director), and Vio, B. (Presenter). (2017, October 8). La vita è una figata! Rome: Stand by me.

Sarto, C. (2018), Bebe Vio: "Voglio sparire e tornare a fare una vita normale," Donna Moderna. Retrieved from: https://www.donnamoderna.com.

Vio, B. (2015). *Mi hanno regalato un sogno. La scherma, lo spritz e le paralimpiadi.* Milano: Rizzoli.

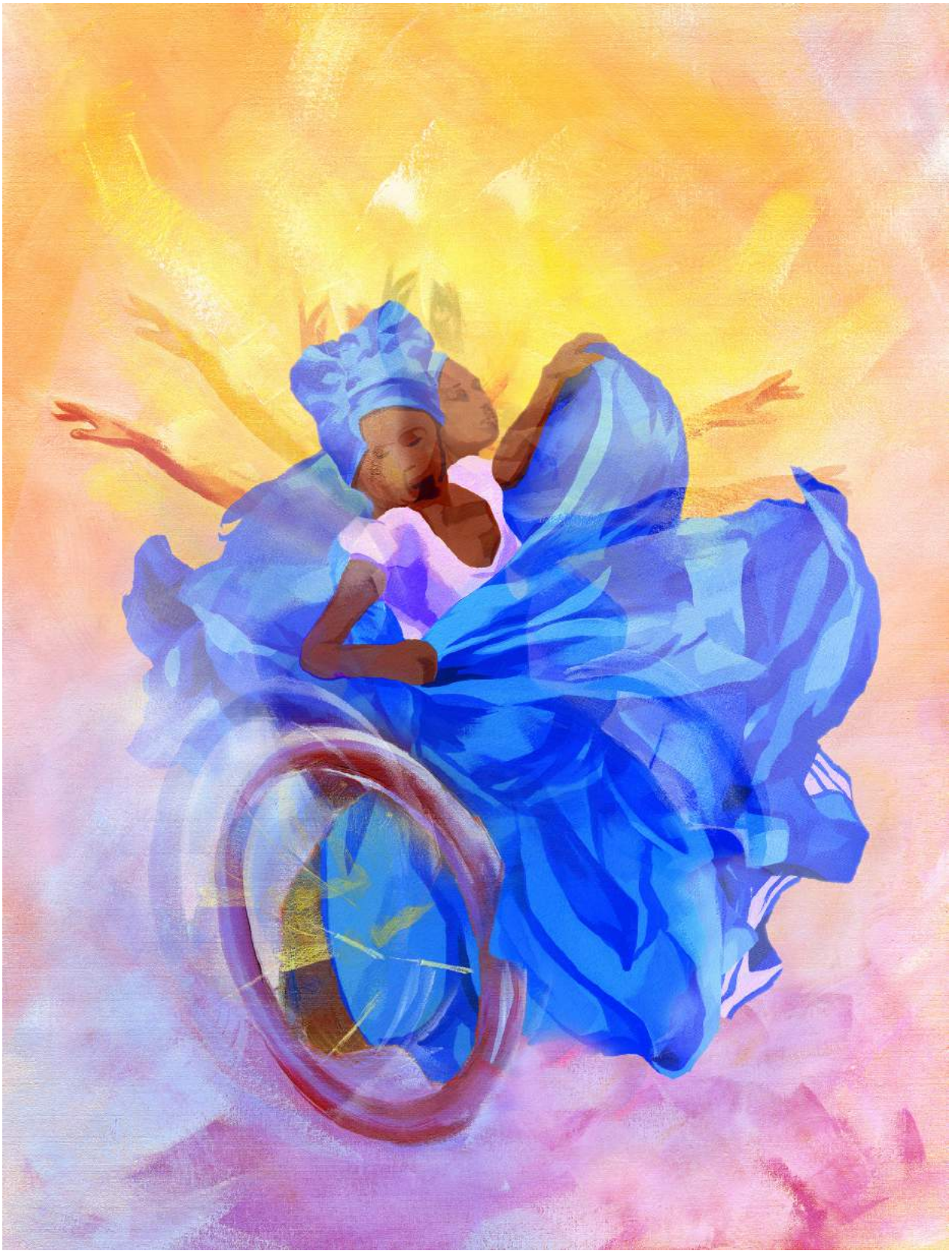
Vio, B. (2018). *Se sembra impossibile allora si può fare: Realizziamo i nostri sogni, affrontando col sorriso ostacoli e paure*. Milano: Rizzoli.

Wälivaara, J. (2018). Blind Warriors, Supercrips, and TechnoMarvels: Challenging Depictions of disability in Star Wars, Journal of Popular Culture, 51 (4), pp. 1036-1056.

Whittington-Walsh, F. (2002). From Freaks to Savants: Disability and hegemony from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1939) to *Sling Blade* (1997), *Disability & Society,* 17 (6), 695-707.

Women in SF (2018). In *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. Retrieved from: http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/.

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2019
ISSN 2472-0837



Wheel Whirl no. 2 by Olivia Wise

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 1, March 2019
ISSN 2472-0837

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 nonrealistic 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 Shawntelle Madion's Coveted series, whose main character Natalya, is a werewolf with OCD. That is entice-

Books in Review, continued

-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: psychically 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.

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2019
ISSN 2472-0837

Books in Review

Edited by Kathryn Allan and Djibril Al-Ayad
Accessing the Future: A Disability-Themed Anthology of Speculative Fiction.
Futurefire.net Publishing, 2015, 233 pp, $16.00
ISBN (print) 978-0-9573975-4-5

Reviewed by **Nahuel Zamponi**

"He told me that before that rainy afternoon when the blue-gray horse threw him, he had been what all humans are: blind, deaf, addlebrained, absent-minded. (I tried to remind him of his exact perception of time, his memory for proper names; he paid no attention to me.) For nineteen years he had lived as one in a dream: he looked without seeing, listened without hearing, forgetting everything, almost everything. When he fell, he became unconscious; when he came to, the present was almost intolerable in its richness and sharpness, as were his most distant and trivial memories. Somewhat later he learned that he was paralyzed. The fact scarcely interested him. He reasoned (he felt) that his immobility was a minimum price to pay. Now his perception and his memory were infallible."

The fragment belongs to Jorge Luis Borges' *Funes the Memorious* [1], a story about an Uruguayan gaucho, Ireneo Funes, who, after falling off his horse and receiving a bad head injury, was unable to forget even the most insignificant detail about reality (hence became incapable of general, platonic ideas).

Like in Ireneo's tale, in *Accessing the Future* the very concept of disability is put into question: while this anthology places disabled characters at the center of the scene, neither falls into the temptation of reducing the subject to a mere celebration of the moral value in overcoming a physical or mental challenge nor to an ode to advanced prosthetics. Very much on the contrary, the stories portrait self-determined personalities, built upon some disabled dimension of the body or the mind that have forged their own destiny by pushing the limits and weaving alliances.

Among the diversity in *Accessing the Future*, readers will find stories about subjects that bear physical impairments, like the teenager in "Pirate Songs", who wakes up in a pirate ship without her wheelchair but still finds a way to gain control of the situation, or the character in "Sense all its Own", who wants to become the best droid pilot, and in the trying, makes us forget that she's blind. Other stories, instead, will portrait characters with mind disabilities, like the enhanced war veteran from "Pay Attention", that struggles to find life purpose among the civilians, or the protagonists in "Screens", whose emotional statuses are no longer a secret. A third category of stories remind us that some life experiences can make us momentarily disabled, like what happens to Sophie in "Better to Have Loved", after the loss of her life partner. The somewhat basic realization that, under certain circumstances, any person could be considered (by itself or others) disabled in some particular aspect, is an additional insight from some of the stories in *Accessing the Future*.

In this anthology, the future is the excuse to explore diverse scenarios where disabilities could play a role in shaping the very nature of the human body and mind. Contrary to the obvious idea that some future technology will help us overcome any obstacles imposed by our own bodies, Accessing the Future brings about narratives of characters whose identities emerge from disabilities. Disabled characters play they central role in the stories, not as survivors of their own destinies, but as identities built upon them. The transversal idea in the anthology is that a "disabled" subject is not just the same subject minus a body part or an ability (physical or mental); on the contrary, it entails a different identity. We (humans) are embodied minds and our bodies (and abilities), far from being simple extensions

Books in Review, continued

of it, are inherent components and producers of it. The identity of the characters is not built before the disability, but as a projection of it onto the universe of possibilities. And here is when it becomes clear that a disability may constitute a disadvantage or a possibility, but it is always an opportunity.

[1] Borges, J L (1944). Ficciones.

JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 3, Issue 1, March 2019
ISSN 2472-0837

About the Contributors

Artists

Dadu Shin is an illustrator living in Brooklyn, New York. He likes making pictures, looking at pictures, and food. He has worked for clients such as *The New York Times, The New Yorker,* Penguin Random House, Facebook, and Armani Exchange.

Nancy J. Willis is a London-based artist who works in a wide range of media, including painting and printmaking. She has exhibited in the Whitechapel Open, Diorama Art Gallery, London, Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle, and BBC Television Centre. She was Artist in Residence at Hammersmith Hospital and Byam Shaw School of Art, and her film "elegy for the Elswick Envoy," commissioned by Channel 4, won 'Best Documentary' at film festivals in the USA, Australia, and Africa.

Olivia Wise is an award-winning illustrator, a graphic designer, art director, and alumna of California College of the Arts. A native of the San Francisco Bay Area, she draws inspiration from the diffused light in the region, which influences her choice of color palette. She paints by hand for the love of paint texture. **[Cover Artist]**

Authors

Antony Mullen is a PhD student in the Department of English Studies at Durham University, UK, and the Convenor of the Thatcher Network. His research examines how the contemporary novel has responded to the emergence and development of Thatcherism since the early 1980s.

Brett Butler is an Assistant Professor of English at Morgan State University. His areas of specialization include business & technical writing, gender studies, comic books & graphic novels, and popular culture. He teaches courses on technical editing: rhetoric and discourse in business, confessionalism, American Literature (1950s-1960s), American detective fiction (1920-1960), and video game narrative(s).

Chiari Montalti is a Ph.D. student in Philosophy at the University of Florence & University of Pisa.

Dophia Butler is a graduate student in English at Morgan State University. Her research interests include deaf culture, sign language interpretation, ESL, and translation studies.

Haihong Li is a lecturer of Radio and Television Broadcasting at Xiamen University Tan Kah Kee College in China. She received a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from University of Georgia in 2013. Her academic research focuses on women's studies, Hong Kong Cinema, video production, and screenwriting. She has published a few articles and presented papers at national professional conferences.

Melinda C. Hall is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Stetson University. She specializes in bioethics, Continental philosophy, and the philosophy of disability. She is the author of *The Bioethics of Enhancement: Transhumanism, Disability, and Biopolitics* (2016), a book which draws on the work of Michel Foucault to demonstrate that disability is central to the debate over human enhancement. Hall is the co-director of the Community Education Project, Stetson's higher education in prison program. She also coordinates the blog BIOPOLITICAL PHILOSOPHY with Shelley Tremain.

Michael Stokes is a scholar whose work engages with the complex entanglements of disability representation, science fiction/horror, critical race, and contemporary culture. He is a first year PhD student at Michigan State University, and his work focuses on the relationships of disabled characters in science fiction and horror literature and film from the 1900s to the present, with race, queerness, and sexuality. He is particularly interested in how these narratives are (dis)figured as they are remade, rebooted, and rehashed in contemporary literature, film, and television. Michael's work has been deliv-

ered in the Centre for Cultural and Disability Studies' Disability and Emotion lecture series and published in *The Journal of Analogue Game Studies*.

Philip Albert Steiner is currently pursuing a Joint MA Degree in English and American Studies at Karl-Franzens-University Graz, and participating in their Teacher training program in English and psychology/philosophy.

Rob Mayo completed his PhD thesis, titled "David Foster Wallace and Dysphoria," at the University of Bristol in 2018. He has also published on Wallace in the *Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies*, and presented research at the International David Foster Wallace Conference. Other research outputs include papers and essays on *Twin Peaks*, 20th century science fiction, video games, and cinema.

Sami Schalk is an Assistant Professor of Women's & Gender Studies at University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her interdisciplinary research focuses broadly on disability, race, and gender in contemporary American literature and culture, especially African American literature, speculative fiction, and feminist literature. Her foundational monograph, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (2018) (reviewed in this issue), "argues that black women writers of speculative fiction reimagine the possibilities and limits of bodyminds, changing the way we read and interpret categories like (dis)ability, race, gender and sexuality within the context of these non-realist texts."

Susan Flynn is a lecturer in media communications at the University of the Arts, London, specialising in screen culture, digital media and disability studies. She has written extensively on the representation of persons with disabilities in popular culture in a number of international journals and collections such as *Cultures of Representation: Disability in World Cinema Contexts*, Ben Fraser (ed.). New York: Wallflower Press 2016, and, E*thos: A Digital Review of Arts, Humanities and Public Ethics.* Susan is editor of a number of collections including *Spaces of Surveillance: States and Selves* London: Palgrave Macmillan 2017; *Surveillance, Race, Culture* London: Palgrave Macmillan 2018; *Surveillance, Architecture and Control* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019; *Surveilling America On Screen: Discourses on the Nostalgic Lens* (forthcoming) New York: McFarland, 2020; S*creen Bodies in the Digital Age: Violence, Voyeurism and Power* (forthcoming) London: Intellect, 2020.

Book Reviewers

Michael Bérubé Professor of Literature and the Former Director of the Institute for the Arts and Humanities at Pennsylvania State University. He is the author of ten books and editor of two more, three of which deal with intellectual disability (and two of which are about his son, James, who was born in 1991 with Down syndrome). He has written several pieces on intellectual disability and science fiction, most extensively in his reading of Philip K. Dick's *Martian Time-Slip* in his 2016 book, *The Secret Life of Stories*.

Nahuel Zamponi is a Postdoctoral Associate in Medicine at Weill Cornell Medical College, and works in their Cerchietti Research Lab.

Editors

Aisha Matthews (Managing Editor) holds a B.A. in English from Yale University, an M.A. from Southern New Hampshire University, and is currently working towards the completion of her Ph.D. in English at Southern Methodist University. Her research interests include Afrofuturism, disability studies, young adult science fiction, womanism, and postmodern theory; and her dissertation work looks towards a genealogy of Afrofuturism, heavily invested in the essentialist/constructionist discourses surrounding black bodies across science and speculative fictions. She also serves as the Director of Literature Programming for the Museum of Science Fiction's Annual Escape Velocity Conference.

Anthony Dwayne Boynton (Editor) is a Southern scholar-blerd based in Lawrence, KS and a doctoral student in English. This Georgia native earned his B.A. in English at Fort Valley State University

and his M.A. in English at Georgia College & State University. He is a writer and scholar of black speculative fiction and researches sci-fi's connections to black cultural politics.

Barbara Jasny (Editor) holds a Ph.D. from Rockefeller University (USA) and her career has been science-first, performing research in molecular biology and virology and then becoming a research Editor and Deputy Editor for Science magazine. She has communicated science through books, articles, posters, art displays, virtual presentations, meetings, digital media, and podcasts.

Benet Pera (Editor) holds a Ph.D. in Biological Sciences from Complutense University of Madrid, Spain. As a postdoctoral researcher he performed preclinical studies at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, and investigated new therapeutic strategies to treat cancer at Weill Cornell Medicine. He is currently applying both his science background and analytical skills in the investment industry, working in equity research covering the biotech sector in an investment bank.

Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay (Editor) holds a Ph.D. in Literature—with a focus on science fiction from the late 19th to mid-20th century Britain and Bengal—from the University of Oslo (Norway), where he is currently a postdoctoral fellow in the history of science (medicine). He employs science studies approaches to the study of science fiction, with an emphasis on medicine, health and race discourses.

Melanie Marotta (Editor) holds a Ph.D. in English from Morgan State University (USA), where she is currently a Lecturer in the Department of English and Language Arts. She is originally from the province of Ontario in Canada, and her research focuses on science fiction, the American West, contemporary American Literature, and Ecocriticism.