

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.

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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

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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.

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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 Hadron'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-

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-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 be 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.