

CANADIAN JOURNAL OF

Disability Studies

Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association | Association canadienne d'études sur le handicap

Canadian Journal of Disability Studies

**Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association
Association canadienne d'études sur le handicap**

Hosted by The University of Waterloo

www.cjds.uwaterloo.ca

**Sami Schalk (2022). *Black Disability Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
ISBN: 9781478025009**

Miriam Spies, Ph.D. Candidate,
Emmanuel College, Toronto School of Theology
miriam [dot] spies [at] mail [dot] utoronto [dot] ca

As a student, I admire Sami Schalk’s clarity and hopes around those from whom she wrote this book. *Black Disability Politics* is not written for or about me, a white crip queer student. Schalk scribes this excellent historical, contextual, and future-oriented book for black disabled readers, inviting them to settle in, hoping to move together slightly closer to collective liberation (3). I was invited into the space to listen and to learn, mindful of the dominance, narrowness, and history of white disability studies. It was a privilege to read as Schalk sought to claim, celebrate, understand, and analyze a “brilliant and imperfect legacy” of black disability politics (5).

Throughout *Black Disability Politics* Schalk identifies the multitude of ways that white supremacy and ableism are intertwined, creating and informing each other. Early on she writes, “...ableism and racism are so deeply linked that we cannot dismantle white supremacy and end its violence against us as a collective if we do not also understand and address the role of ableism in shaping Black lives” (10-11). Schalk expands the field of disability studies by compellingly arguing how ableism impacts all Black people and thus must be countered as a system of oppression along with racism. By bringing well-researched historical examples of Black disability politics into conversation with current anti-oppression movements, Schalk’s demonstrates how Black people have long engaged in disability politics. This is a remarkable contribution to disability studies which has, in

recent decades, been critiqued for ignoring Black approaches to and understandings of disability. Her strong analysis establishes that Black disability politics are intersectional with the emphasis on being race centered, contextualized and historicized, and holistic.

I especially found her argument provocative and helpful to learn how and why Black disability politics have not been and are not necessarily based in disability identity. Schalk argues that this largely is not due to internalized ableism. Rather, she thoughtfully argues Black communities have historically had and presently lack adequate access to diagnoses and care. Additionally, there is a significant amount of disablement because of trauma and oppression. Pointing to, among other histories, state and police violence, testing of the medical industrial complex, and environmental racism, resulting in a range of disabilities, Schalk clearly describes how disability is experienced differently from wealthy white populations. Schalk names how histories have been misunderstood and dismissed based on self-presentation, an invaluable contribution that disability studies must (un)learn.

Schalk's focus on two communities who enacted Black disability politics in past decades, noting learnings and celebrations, is incredibly effective. This focus demonstrates that Black communities have been living out anti-ableist politics recognizing the collusion of racism and ableism, something with which the field of white disability studies continues to struggle and that requires great transformation.

Schalk thoughtfully analyzes the work of the Black Panther Party in the 1970s into the early 1980s, actions that have only appeared in passing reference in many disability histories. She powerfully contends that their contributions have been underappreciated and in so doing, communities have failed to recognize the actions of the party, in fact,

demonstrated solidarity and knowledge of interconnected oppressions. She invites readers to consider the 504-sit in where Panthers not only provided essential material support, but Schalk shows, they also articulated how disability politics are necessary for collective liberation (32-33). Similarly, Schalk importantly puts forth how the Panthers connected the psychiatric industrial complex and the prison industrial complex in their performance of “curative violence” (a term coined by Eunjung Kim). Schalk significantly identifies this intersectional understanding as a gap in disability studies. Schalk calls for Black studies to learn from Black disability politics, alongside demonstrating knowledge necessary in disability studies. Disability studies and Black studies can particularly learn from her call to focus on violence as the key issue rather than disability as the problem, to emphasize intersecting concerns and approaches, and provide material support for people disabled by the violence of injustice and oppression, such as instances of excessive police violence.

Schalk then turns to the National Black Women’s Health Project in the 1980s-1990s, which also has been largely dismissed because explicit engagement with disability is rare but, she argues, the politics are anti-ableist and critical to understanding and advancing Black disability politics. Schalk points to their advocacy for spiritual care, choosing not to dismiss the significance of spiritual practices but also not ignoring any harm caused. A nuanced approach is needed in enacting Black disability politics, something that is often not articulated in white disability studies. As well, Schalk demonstrated how the Project enacted Black Disability Politics of HIV/AIDS. She recalls how HIV/AIDS became firmly associated with white gay men but numbers among Black

people, including women, tell a different story. For this history, Schalk draws on intersectional analysis to construct a more nuanced argument, lamenting how disabled people have distanced themselves from people with HIV/AIDS. The National Black Women's Health Project provided essential education with the widest impact and reach in Black communities focusing on contextualized and holistic care. Schalk argues that though the Project might have done more to develop Black disability politics, they importantly did not limit access or work to those who identify as disabled, significant for the reasons named previously about disability-identity based politics.

In speaking with cultural workers enacting Black disability politics today, Schalk heard them stress the need to claim Black disability history and acknowledge the erasure of Black disabled people's stories. They emphasized, as Schalk does, how ableism and racism are inseparable and mutually constitutive, "meaning that they help create and form one another and rely on each other to function" (144). One of her interviewees, TL Lewis has developed and continues to refine an expansive definition of ableism that is worth echoing in this review: Ableism is a system that values people based on ideals of normalcy and productivity, something that the field of disability studies does recognize. However, Schalk convincingly draws on Lewis to challenge disability studies to recognize how such ideals are rooted in anti-Blackness, eugenics, colonialism, and capitalism. Together, they powerfully challenge disability studies and Black studies to learn how people do not need to be disabled to experience ableism so that all fields work towards collective liberation. Schalk draws on both the historical research and her interviews with Black cultural workers to insist on the need for activist and solidarity movements to center care and

accessibility, addressing and attending to how various intersecting oppressions impact bodyminds (148-149).

Schalk's (not a) conclusion empowers Black disabled communities, both within and outside the academy, to further develop and enact Black disability politics. Her book will, if it has not already, serve as an excellent foundation for the further development of Black disability studies and politics. It is an essential interrogation of disability studies that has been dismissed and is at risk of continuing to ignore how disability is understood within a particular community and historical context. She ends the book with a pause, waiting for Black disabled knowledge to come forth, knowledge that, Schalk contends, is essential for the future.

As I was finishing Schalk's book, I was filled with much gratitude to be welcomed in to listen to this conversation around Black Disability Politics – especially for the reminder that, though I have come to claim my crip and queer identities, there are multiple ways, contexts, and histories at play when enacting disability politics. In Canada, we are privileged to have Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha writing and enacting disability justice as a trans person of colour. I look forward to more Black and Indigenous voices resharing the history of disability politics with, in, and through their communities and their enacting of disability politics to shape the future on Turtle Island. As a white crip queer woman, I know I have much to learn and unlearn and I thank Schalk for inviting me to listen in such a space.