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## *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*

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**Allan, Kathryn (Ed.). *Disability in Science Fiction: Representations of Technology as Cure*.  
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Kathryn Allan's anthology *Disability in Science Fiction: Representations of Technology as Cure* is an excellent collection that explores the points of intersection between SF studies (the academic study of works of science fiction) and DS or disability studies. The essays collected cover a wide range of SF works, ranging from the well known to the more obscure, as well as a broad spectrum of dis/abilities. But all the essays collected explore the issue of the relationship between the body and technology, and how the particular ways in which this relationship is explored in SF can be used to both problematize dominant constructions of the normative body and re-imagine the body in less disabling ways.

While all the essays in this collection address the issue of the cure trope in SF in one way or another, one set concentrates on the tendency in the genre—because of its strong connections to the tradition of utopian fiction in which the imagined society has overcome all social “problems” (poverty, war, crime, disease)—to assume that technology will have eliminated dis/ability. Whether by means of robotics or genetic treatments, this tradition of SF postulates that future societies will have advanced medical technology to such a point that most, if not all, disabilities are easily curable through the use of prosthetics (here defined quite broadly to consider certain genetic “corrections” as a kind of prosthesis in addition to the term's more conventional uses).

In particular, in his exploration on the connections between the *Star Wars* film franchise and Greco-Roman conceptions of natural wholeness versus the rational mind, Covino argues that

the films present a troublingly ableist understanding of a society which, although it has technology-based cures for most conditions, nevertheless regards those with prosthetic limbs as diminished because they partake of the machine. The author goes on to note that droids and other machines are, in the *Star Wars* universe, understood to be sub-human as demonstrated by their menial status and work, and so those who partake of the robotic are freaks who have dangerously transgressed social order—typified, of course, by the figure of Darth Vader.

In contrast, there are chapters which present works that problematize this conventional, utopia-derived narrative of technology as cure and cyborg as freak. Cheyne and Binns respectively consider, as examples, the short story *Tango Charlie and Foxtrot Romeo* and the television series *The Bionic Woman*. In both the prosthetic does not provide a complete cure. Rather, in the former case, Cheyne argues that prostheses simply lessen the degree of impairment without eliminating it, while Binns shows how technology actually causes additional impairment because the protagonist's body sometimes rejects its bionic prosthetics. And, in both cases, the prosthetics, in addition to addressing the perceived impairments, give their users extra abilities that allow them to become not merely contributing but important members of their societies (the protagonist of the short story becomes a celebrated artist, while the bionic woman becomes a secret agent).

Building on this, then, in an excellent piece on the two films *Avatar* and *How To Train Your Dragon*, McReynolds uses the concept of the prosthetic relationship to argue for how these films both problematize the dominant conception of the healthy body as one which is self-contained and self-sufficient, and offer an alternative to the conventional cure narrative. The essayist suggests that the prosthetic relationship makes this problematization possible because, rather than conceiving of the prosthetic in the conventional manner in which an inanimate object

is affixed to the body in order to correct a perceived deficiency, it facilitates a joining of two self-aware and consenting bodies into a symbiotic (though interestingly enough she does not use that word to describe it) relationship of mutual aid which extends the capabilities of both. This mutuality, then, blurs the boundaries of the body as those involved in the prosthetic relationship join together, in the case of the two films here discussed, literally. Indeed, in the case of *Avatar*, all the species of the planet on which the film is set—except for the invading humans of course—are linked by a giant neural-like network. These works of SF, then, McReynolds argues, present an alternative imagining of what a whole body might be—one that is not whole because it is self-contained and self-sufficient, but because it is in relationship with other bodies. And the author suggests an alternate conception of healing as well, where to be healed is to enter into such relationships rather than to have a device correct a perceived lack.

In addition to the traditional discussion of prosthetics and cure related to the physical body, chapters also feature SF works dealing with cognitive dis/abilities and autism. Sklar discusses the story *Flowers for Algernon*, about a cognitively dis/abled young man who undergoes an experimental procedure intended to elevate his IQ. While said procedure works, it does so only temporarily, and in the end the protagonist returns to his original state. The character's return is described in language of sinking back into a darkness, into which he dreads returning.

Further, Tidwell's essay contrasts two short stories that portray autistic or autistic-like protagonists but treat the issue of the cure in opposite ways. The first, *The Speed of Dark*, portrays a young man who, like the protagonist of *Flowers for Algernon*, undergoes a special procedure intended to cure his autism. In the end, he chooses to take the treatment in order to fulfill his dream of going to the moon. The author finds problematic that the story rather uncritically upholds the dominant narrative of cure as individually, freely chosen self-fulfillment

and progress. Tidwell then contrasts this story with one entitled *Movement*, featuring a girl with an autism-like condition that causes her to perceive time differently than neurotypical people. She ultimately chooses not to take the cure because she would lose the beauty in the way she experiences reality; she would lose what she feels makes her who she is. But what is more, the essayist argues, she (the protagonist) offers an alternate way to think about progress. Rather than a linear trajectory—that single, straight-forward path from lesser to greater, from imperfection to perfection, from disease to cure—the protagonist of *Movement* suggests thinking in terms of random, simultaneous, somewhat chaotic evolution where many new forms and ways of being have space and time to emerge as they will. Tidwell then argues that this conception allows us to think about progress without it necessitating the cure in order to fulfill a linear logic.

Another piece in this collection, Cline explores the connection between consciousness and the body by examining works which imagine transcending the body altogether. And again, the author explores this by contrasting two stories—the short story *Star Maker*, and the novel *Blood Music*. Like in the chapter on *Avatar*, here too Cline suggests that, in their depictions of the transcending of the body and the merging of consciousnesses, these stories offer an alternative to the dominant image of the whole, self-contained, singular body as the seat of mind and identity. He also, however, acknowledges the ways in which this envisioning of a world where body is utterly transcended—a very strong trope in SF—is highly problematic because of the way it tends to play into the negation of the body as a site of valid knowledge and experience. He argues that such post-humanist narratives, which imagine the body—whether conventionally able or disabled—as a cage of limitations to be escaped from into realms of pure consciousness, need to be read with great care and caution as their logic of linear, upward progress reifies the

disabled body as the ultimate signifier of the limitations of the human body and the need to transcend it.

In the last essay in the book Canavan discusses imaginings of Huntington's Disease in relation to the notions of genetic determinism and what constitutes hope. Portrayals in fiction of Huntington's Disease as an immediate death sentence instantly erases all other facts about the life of the "sufferer"—an instant dehumanization. Indeed, Huntington's carriers are portrayed in such fiction as feeling that they ought never to have been born, and as wishing never to reproduce themselves so as not to pass on their affliction. Canavan contrasts these dominant narratives with a less mainstream story which imagines a Huntington's-like condition. The essayist argues that this counter-story offers a conception of hope and dignity not based on a cure or a life free from disease, and also a dignity and humanity not based on the heteronormative standard of reproductive futurity.

As can be seen from the above, this collection contains some true gems! Indeed, all the chapters in this book are fine, thought-provoking pieces, all of which demonstrate the power of SF to trouble and destabilize ableist, heteronormative conventions of life and literature. And, indeed, these works make their cases very convincingly, offering both scholars and readers of SF a plethora of new ways to think about bodies and technology. They suggest how the body might be conceptualized differently than as a self-contained, autonomous unit, and ask us to think about the body as it exists in symbiotic relationship to other beings, including those not usually considered our equals. And they draw out the relationship between whether technology is beneficial or enslaving and its relations of production and consumption, exposing the often occluded connections between ableism, racism, patriarchy, and capitalism. They have us consider, in a critical way, the often taken for granted relationship between consciousness and

the body, and they even offer a powerful challenge to the dominant narrative of incurable, terminal illness as the ultimate loss of dignity and humanity. Indeed, these essays offer powerful critiques of and alternatives to the cure narrative as a whole. In her introduction to the collection, Kathryn Allan writes that she intends this book to be an opening round in the only just beginning conversation between SF studies and critical dis/ability studies. But I would argue that she has quite surpassed that humble goal, giving us instead an anthology that will remain a critical work for scholars and fans in both fields for years to come.