

Christopher M. Bell, ed. *Blackness and Disability*. FORECAAST 21. Berlin and East Lansing: LIT, 2011. 165 pp. € 29,00

The editor's introduction to this timely collection of essays, by the late Christopher M. Bell, makes an important point that should give pause to all those concerned with the development of Black and African American Studies in Europe, where this volume originated, and in the United States, whose black cultures it studies. Bell writes: "too much critical work in African American Studies posits the African American body politic in an ableist (read non-disabled) fashion" (3). Pointing to the well-known cases of historical figures, Harriet Tubman, Emmett Till, and James Byrd (murdered in Jasper Texas in 1998), Bell demonstrates how their disabilities were erased or at best "relegated to the margins" of the respective historical accounts of their lives and, in the cases of Till and Byrd, violent deaths.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, relative invisibility of disability in the historical and scholarly representations of people of color has had to do with race and institutions. Given the hegemony of ableist body politic in African American Studies, it is easy to understand why the accounts of even well known black lives – such as Tubman's or Till's – focus on victimization of racial subjects rather than black and disabled subjects. Furthermore, Disability Studies as a field of scholarly inquiry has been predominantly concerned with white bodies and housed away, so to speak, from non-white subjects, if not exclusively practiced by "by a corps of white scholars and activists," as Bell argues (3). While offering this collection of essays in hopes that it will remedy this situation, the editor emphasizes that the goal of *Blackness and Disability* is twofold. First, to perform the more obvious "recovery work" that examines the title words as they refer to bodies – "black" and "disabled" – together, with all the ambiguities of the latter term, such as "hidden disability" like AIDS or chronic conditions, seen up front. Second, and perhaps most important, the volume sets out to perform the difficult "work that requires a willingness to deconstruct the system that would keep those bodies in separate spheres" (3).

Organized both chronologically – moving from the times of slavery to the recent and current wars – and thematically – including studies of cognitive impairment, representations of violence in photography, and narratives of illness and treatment, as well as commentary on disability and blackness – the volume offers a comprehensive and provocative addition to both areas of study it targets in its title. As such it is a valuable addition to the libraries of both scholars and students in these fields. It could also serve as an organizing volume on a number of upper division undergraduate and graduate course reading lists.

The first essay, Michelle Jarman's "Coming Up from Underground: Uneasy Dialogues at the Intersections of Race, Mental Illness, and Disability Studies," examines the "complex (dis)junctures between disability and race" by focusing on Bebe More Campbell's final novel, *72-Hour Hold* (2005). Jarman delves into the text, which portrays a mother-daughter story of bipolar disorder, as well as into psychiatric survivor literature, to illustrate historical and cultural contexts of "racialized mental illness." She points out Campbell's problematic conflation of slavery and mental illness, critiques the "(mis)associations between mental illness and blackness among African American communities whose "outright denial of psychiatric disability ... often poses serious problems to people who could benefit from mental health support services" (19). While Jarman praises Campbells' explicit endorsement of psychiatric intervention, she calls for an approach that would combine such interventions with (quoting Elizabeth Donaldson) the "disability studies agenda ... that fights discrimination [and] seeks to dismantle ideologies of oppression"; she calls for a struggle against monolithic discourses and for an "acceptance of cognitive diversity" (27).

Focusing on the "ubiquitous role of photography in the creation of cultural memory and the demarcation of the black subject through formal techniques," Cassandra Jackson's "Visualizing Slavery: Photography and the Disabled Subject in the Art of Carrie Mae Weems" begins with a glimpse of the well-known 1863 image of an enslaved black man, whose scarred back has been imprinted in the collective memory of abolitionists, writers, students, and scholars. While appropriations of images that put disabled black bodies on display should be approached as troubling –such as Weems' study of "trauma and testimony" that employs the above mentioned image entitled "Black and Tanned" (1995) – they can also deliver redemptive power, Jackson argues. Weems's work gestures at but also dissociates itself from the reductive narrative of slavery whose focus has been on collective and emblematic victimization. Weems's goal, Jackson shows, is to bring individual bodies and histories to bear on traumatic memories that cannot be represented easily, unless by means of a "testimonial mode," the mode of artistic production and reception that allows for a productive bearing of witness between the past and present.

Both Stella Bolaki's "Challenging Invisibility, Making Connections: Illness, Survival, and Black Struggles in Audre Lorde's Work" and Therí Alyce Pickens's "Pinning Down the Phantasmagorical: Discourse of Pain and the Rupture of Post-Humanism in Evelyne Accad's *The Wounded Breast* and Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*" pay homage to Audre Lorde and her writings on cancer. Lorde appears in both these essays as an inspiration for scholarship on physical violence, embodiment, race, gender, sexuality, and illness. Focusing on biographical and medical contexts of Lorde's personal

struggles with breast cancer and near blindness, Bolaki's essay probes the ways in which the black and lesbian author-as-patient experienced not only exclusion and discrimination, but also compulsion to perform acceptable identities for her health providers. Bolaki's skillful readings illustrate poignantly that living multiple subjectivities from within her ailing body made Lorde experience the concept of intersectionality in ways that fueled both her writing and activism. Pickens's essay puts Lorde's work in conversation with Evelyne Accad's and argues for reading racialized and gendered "discourses surrounding pain itself" as a cross-generational conversation among women of color. Reading both the texts and books as material culture productions, Pickens argues that they disrupt Haraway's "cyborg ideal" by prioritizing embodied experience and the erotic as sources of healing.

Robert McRuer's "Submissive and Non-Compliant: The Paradox of Gary Fisher" deploys queer studies approaches to examine discourses of rehabilitation and HIV/AIDS in the self-portrait of the "black queer sociopath" in *Gary in Your Pocket: Stories and Notebooks of Gary Fisher*. By embracing the ambivalences and paradoxes of Fisher's subjectivity as edited into a book by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, McRuer shows that Fisher's text offers not only an in-your-face alternative to cultural models of mainstream black masculinity, but also elucidates the mechanisms that give us both normative and non-normative identities. Quoting Robert Reid-Pharr's reading of Fisher, McRuer argues that making an identity is always dependent on degradation of another. Hence, not only should we oppose "identity politics proper" (105), even when it is in service of rehabilitation of marginalized subjects such as Fisher, but we "must be [also] able to grapple with the spaces where identity unravels, with what we might call the myriad crip forms that identity trouble takes" (108). Similarly focused on the impact of AIDS in queer of color communities, Ned Mitchell's "Sexual, Ethnic, Disabled, and National Identities in the 'Borderlands' of Latino/a America and African America" deploys Anzaldúa's theories of liminality and critique of cultural binaries to examine Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets* and Susana Aiken and Carlos Aparicio's *The Transformation*. Mitchell explores the ways in which white Christianity retains the power to colonize and even to co-opt the immigrant and queer, and especially what he terms the "revolutionary" and "transformative" transgender border subject. He argues that such a subject ought to be seen as both a product and construction arising from a fruitful dialogue between "black modernities" and the Latino/a concept of the borderland; he sees it as capable of subverting the received "American" immigrant imagination, or at least capable of imagining alternative "ways of living that are never entirely subsumed into the mechanisms of empire" (124).

Chris Bell begins his essay, “‘Could This Happen to You?’: Stigma in Representations of the Down Low,” with a recollection of the “venerable” *New York Times Magazine* (August 3, 2003) feature article on the down low and the “black homosexual underground.” Neither the article’s “scopophilic representation of non-normative sexuality” nor its “predictable fashion in which ... [it] demonizes and maligns black men as sexual predators” caused anger among its readers. Rather, it was the fact that “those men” were getting away with not owning up to what they were “like every other red-blooded American” (127). Placing the term “down low” in a historical and cultural context of national imaginary, Bell discusses its origins in hip hop music, its contentious representations in the print media, and the ways in which it provided yet another venue for AIDS to be used “as a tool of policing desire.” Sweeping through local, minority, and mainstream publications that depict myriad ways in which the down low has been constructed around an “inherent double standard” of race and gender, Bell engages in a rich dialogue with the key scholars in queer theory and race and gender studies. His bravura conclusion juxtaposes the 2004 same-sex affair of the white New Jersey governor and the enthusiasm with which the film *Brokeback Mountain* was received: “Few audience members and/or critics applied the appellation ‘down low’ to this behavior, revealing the double standard that is a constitutive element of the ‘phenomenon’: when black men are on the down low it’s a moral crisis; when white men are on the down low, or ... portray men on the down low, they are nominated for Oscars” (137).

Continuing the focus on media analysis, Moya Bailey’s “‘The Illest’: Disability as Metaphor in Hip Hop Music” argues for turning critical attention to the ways in which disabled bodies, and their segregation from one another – such as between those with physical and cognitive impairments – are represented in this popular musical genre. Offensive language in hip-hop lyrics, movies, and other media proves, she argues, that ableism as a form of discrimination is still largely invisible within popular culture even though audiences have become less tolerant toward sexism and homophobia. Turning toward historical contexts of governmental policy, Carlos Clarke Drazen’s “Both Sides of the Two-Sided Coin: Rehabilitation of Disabled African American Soldiers” examines U. S., veterans in the theaters of World War II and the ongoing Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Drazen interrogates the meanings of treatment and disability in the twentieth century, and casts a retrospective glance to the first uses of veterans’ benefits during the Civil War and then World War I. Her piece demonstrates that attitudes toward rehabilitation in the twentieth century, and especially after 1945, seemed to reflect the attitudes toward the Civil Rights Movement. As for the returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, she concludes that, though progress has been made, they have not escaped the entrenched racism marking American military culture in the twenty-first century.

In its content and scope, not to mention its theoretical contribution to multiple scholarly fields, *Blackness and Disability* is a must-have book for anyone serious about linking African American Studies with discourses on racialized embodiment, ableism, pain, illness, and impairment, not to mention HIV/AIDS, healing, rehabilitation, and circulation of terms that put a new spin on intersectionality, such as the “down low.” The book could have used an index; some readers may feel that a few chapters carry more gravitas than others. I read this occasional unevenness of singular pieces as not surprising, however, given not only the ambitious thematic range achieved between the covers of this volume, but also the untimely passing of its editor well before the project was completed. Indeed, the book saw the light of day due to the labor of love of many, and especially the President of the Collegium for African American Research (CAAR) in whose FORECAAST series it has been published, Sabine Broeck, whose Foreword is reticent about how much sweat and diplomacy it really took to finally see *Blackness and Disability* in print.

Perhaps it is unorthodox to close a scholarly book review on a personal note. Be it as it may, I include these remarks as a tribute to Chris Bell, who has not only put in motion what promises to be a paradigm shift in both academic fields that feature in his volume’s title, but also in how we think about what it means to be a scholar here and now. Chris was a complex and wonderful person: a gentle soul and a keen researcher, teacher, and activist; a brave world traveler and compassionate colleague and peer. He walked the talk and feared nothing, no matter how it hurt. We met at the first African American Studies conference in Poland, where he was teaching English at the time, and remained in touch until his death. He sought my advice as a graduate student, and encouraged my work on Baldwin as a colleague; he cheered me on through tough times and health crises of my own. The very fact that his book is now available to readers in both Europe and the United States makes the toughness of his absence easier to bear. It is also certain to make the circle of his admirers much larger.

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