

Project(ing) Human

Representations of Disability in Science Fiction

Edited by

Courtney Stanton
Rutgers University-Newark

Series in Critical Media Studies



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INTRODUCTION

Courtney Stanton

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When we think about science fiction, we often think in terms of worlds. A treasured aspect of science fiction is its ability to transport us—to distant planets, to shadowy laboratories filled with mysterious specimens, to future societies filled with technologies and innovations that boggle the mind. What often goes unnoticed, though, overshadowed by the magnitude of such world-building, are the structures governing the people within those worlds. Indeed, what is dazzling and *new* within science fiction—that which tells us we are no longer at the same time or in the same place, no longer bounded by contemporary science or technology—tends to get the most attention, and understandably so. Yet, there is always an undercurrent of the present, the *now*, in the ways that works of science fiction choose to represent people, and the primary goal of this collection is to illustrate the power of the science fiction genre to define humanness, and all that this entails, through its choices.

Take, for example, the wildly popular AMC television series *The Walking Dead*. The show, based on graphic novels of the same name, follows a central group of characters as they attempt to survive and rebuild in the wake of a global zombie apocalypse precipitated by a virus. It spans an impressive eleven seasons (and counting) and has inspired multiple spinoff television series, web series, videogames, and an endless supply of critical commentary. Yet, in the ever-expanding universe of this particular media juggernaut, disability experience gets very little mention. Sure, there are those characters who acquire disabilities in the course of their zombie-fighting days – main character Herschel loses a leg to a bite, the villainous Governor loses an eye in a fight – but what about all of the disabilities that presumably existed in this world prior to the series' beginning? Where are the mobility impairments, the arthritis, the herniated discs? Where is the neurodivergence? Recent data from the CDC¹ suggests that nearly 1 in 4 adults in the United States identifies as having a disability, yet this huge swath of the population remains largely and conspicuously absent from the imagined world of this media behemoth. One might try arguing that

¹ “Disability Impacts All of Us Infographic.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, September 16, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/healthandenvironment/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html>.

individuals with disabilities were simply less likely to survive, but more than just insulting in its simplicity, such an argument seems implausible, at least on such a total scale. One might also argue that disability simply isn't the focus of a show like *The Walking Dead*, that it's beyond the scope of the series to bring in characters with disabilities and grapple with the ways they might complicate survival in a zombie-riddled environment. There is a certain logic to this argument—indeed, the presence of disability *would* complicate life in such a world—but it is an unsettling logic, as it allows for the sidestepping or simplification of disability representation.

Moreover, the crucial flaw in this thinking is the assumption that a lack of representation is synonymous with a lack of opinion or judgment—i.e., that not offering substantive representations of disability is effectively the same as remaining neutral in the disability conversation. Yet, the absences and silences within shows like *The Walking Dead* convey meaning. When works of fiction disregard or diminish groups of people, they are conveying beliefs—beliefs not only about the stories they want to tell but also the stories they do *not* want to tell, about the people they see as valuable and those they see as disposable, about what the future holds, and doesn't, for all of us. So, we must consider: what happens when we are given a scenario like that of *The Walking Dead*, or any work of fiction which imagines a world other than our own, in which disability experience is essentially blackened out, de-prioritized and ignored to the point of eradication?

Science fiction is uniquely suited to the exploration of disability representation precisely because it grapples with questions of humanity and futurity. Works of science fiction often contend with concepts of transhumanism, embodiment, and autonomy more directly than do those of other genres, and in doing so, they raise significant questions about the experience of disability. Through the creation of technologically- and scientifically-advanced worlds, a work of science fiction may offer insight into the projected futures for bodies and minds and what role, if any, disability may play within such worlds. Through not only disabled characters but also biotechnologies, sociocultural hierarchies, and conceptions of the ideal, such works reflect the values placed on disability in both the future and the world of today. As Ray Bradbury famously once said, science fiction offers us “the history of ideas, the history of our civilization birthing itself”.² As a genre, science fiction offers the enjoyment and the allures of foreign lands, of exotic creatures and new ways of being, but it also

²This quote is widely attributed to Bradbury, but an exact source remains elusive. It is likely he spoke these words during an unrecorded speech at Brown University in March 1995.

encourages us to confront central questions of our own existence. What facets of our lives and ourselves do we wish to be different? How do we understand perfection, and what are we willing to do or sacrifice to achieve it? How will our utility and our worth change over time? Through its focus on future and other worlds, science fiction calls on us to reckon with the state of our own world, as well as our places within it. Civilization “birth[s] itself” through science fiction not only because the genre contributes to tangible scientific and technological progress – prominent examples include the flip-phone, inspired by *Star Trek*, or the submarine, invented by a fan of Jules Verne—but also in the ways that it shapes our beliefs about what it means, and also what it *should* mean, to be human. It is through grappling with these profound questions that science fiction intersects with disability studies, in ways that may be empowering or exploitative.

Looking ahead to the chapters in this collection, there are some important definitions to be established. First, while it is infamously difficult for creators and consumers of science fiction to agree on a single definition for the genre itself, a couple of the more prominent attempts are useful for grounding the present collection. First, Isaac Asimov called science fiction “that branch of literature which deals with the reaction of human beings to changes in science and technology.”³ Such a definition is useful for its simple focus on science and technology, which helps to distinguish it from fantasy, as well as for its foregrounding of humanity; it is the reaction of humans *to* the scientific and technological changes, not the changes themselves, that is the focus. What is lacking in this definition, though, is a sense of how science fiction reflects our current situation, and for this, we rely on words from Phillip K. Dick, who writes that science fiction presents “a society that does not in fact exist, but is predicated on our known society; that is, our known society acts as a jumping-off point for it. . . . It is our world dislocated by some kind of mental effort on the part of the author, our world transformed into that which it is not or not yet”.⁴ Dick’s definition helpfully emphasizes that even its novelty, science fiction reflects the world that we know, and this reflection opens the door to the critical analysis of this collection. In its creation of worlds and tools and ideas, science fiction disseminates beliefs about what *will* and *should* be tomorrow, thereby passing judgment on what *is* today.

³ Isaac Asimov, “How Easy to See the Future!,” *Natural History*, April 1975, 62.

⁴ Philip K. Dick, “My Definition of Science Fiction,” in *The Shifting Realities of Philip K. Dick: Selected Literary and Philosophical Writings*, ed. Lawrence Sutin (NY: Vintage Books, 1995), 99.

While the chapters here tackle science fiction as it appears in a variety of media and as it manifests in a variety of subgenres, it is these conceptual elements – the focus on humanity’s relationship to science and technology and on the ways that future and other worlds reflect our own – that unify this collection’s discussions of science fiction, more so than any exacting requirements of the genre. Some may argue, for instance, that *The Walking Dead* qualifies as horror as much or more so than it does as science fiction, and there may be some truth to this. Yet, it is a fitting example not only because of its basic scientific premise (the viral-induced zombification) but, more importantly, because the series ultimately focuses on people. The series explores how they survive together, how they change (or don’t) in the face of terror, how the concerns of their old lives seep into their new reality, and it is these elements which are, from the perspective of this collection, most important (and, it should be noted, it is the series’ choice to focus on these humanistic elements that make its lack of disability representation so profoundly troubling).

Likewise, the approach to disability herein is grounded in a shared set of assumptions but is broadly inclusive. There are discussions of physical disability, psychological and mental disability, developmental disability, congenital disabilities along with those that are acquired, etc. The distinctions among these various disability experiences are incredibly significant and, what’s more, each of them deserves its own book-length examination of its relationship to science fiction. Indeed, I hope that this collection serves as a fruitful step in that direction. Collections like this one join a very limited few extended works – Kathryn Allan’s *Disability in Science Fiction: Technology as Cure*⁵ is a notable example – that explore representations of disability in science fiction, and so it continues to build the broader groundwork necessary for future, more pointed discussions.

Still, while the pieces of the collection cut a broad cloth in terms of disability perspective, they are united in at least two important ways. First, the contributors to this collection all work from a shared understanding of disability experience, namely one that conceptualizes disability as an intertwining of social forces and lived experiences. As various chapters discuss in greater detail, the history of disability—by which I mean not only the history of recorded instances of disability but also the history of its representation in media and the history of scholarly attempts at its definition and exploration—is one of many phases. For much of recorded history, disability has been understood almost exclusively through frames of weakness, flaw, and stigma. This “medical model” synonymizes disability and impairment, framing any

⁵ (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

and all disability as something to be cured or concealed, and effectively ignoring the roles that one's culture plays in the evaluation of bodies and minds. As a counter to the deleterious effects of such ideology, the "social model" came along in the mid- to late-twentieth century, with the aim of reframing disability as a product of culture. The adage that it is not one's wheelchair that keeps them from entering a building but rather the fact that the building lacks a ramp illustrates the basic perspective of the social model. A wheelchair user living in a culture that values disability and reflects this value through its architecture—by putting ramps on public buildings—would, as the social model suggests, have a vastly different experience of disability than one who lived in a culture that did not.

As is often the case with sticky and complex conversations of identity, however, even the social model has, over time, been scrutinized and found to be somewhat lacking—a development that leads us to the conception of disability which guides the current collection. The emphasis on cultural factors, while crucial to not just a thoughtful understanding of disability experience but also the achievement of political and cultural power for individuals and communities of disability, can, when relied on too exclusively, undercut the importance of the embodied and lived experiences of individuals. If disability is seen as a sort of abstract concept, a social construct reflecting values assigned to particular peoples, this risks effacing the lived realities of these people. To use the example above, the wheelchair user has a strong point about the role played by society in shaping the experience of disability, but this need not necessarily mean that disability exists *solely* as a manifestation of societal belief—that disability, or disability identity, simply wouldn't exist in a world where every building had ramps, elevators, and so on. Beyond our interactions within the larger culture, there are the many real, lived moments that make up the experience of being a person with disabilities – moments of bodily pain and pleasure, of frustration and elation – and these moments are of equal significance. As such, neither the social model nor the medical model alone is adequate to thoughtfully engage disability experience; they must be intertwined, framing disability as an irreducible network of social, cultural, and personal, embodied experiences.

Along with this shared understanding of disability, another significant unifying thread of this collection is a belief in the importance of representation and, from this, a commitment to improving the representation of disability within popular media. Just as sociocultural understandings of disability began with medicalized views, so too does popular media have a long history of portraying individuals with disabilities as weak, lacking utility, or in need of cure. Moreover, while scholarly views of disability experience have progressed in ways like those described above, continually probing accepted ideas and

seeking greater nuance, popular representations have unsurprisingly lagged behind. Thus, the contributors to this collection are writing from the perspective that there is still much work to do to improve representations of disability in film, literature, television, video games, and any other popular media. “Improve” here entails not simply increasing visibility, though, of course, this is one of many goals; improvement also entails scrutinizing the nature and consequences of our portrayals and pushing for more careful, complex representations of disability in science fiction—and, indeed, in every genre.

Overview of Chapters

The first section of this book centers on the concept of othering and considers ways that disability experience has been othered in media. There is a long history of othering disability within popular media, from the overt spectacles of traveling freak shows to the more subtle but no less pernicious signaling within contemporary media. Over time the portrayals of disability in popular media have generally become less exploitative, at least less blatantly so, but still, examples abound. The chapters in this section, then, examine the ways that disability continues to be othered in popular media, with the first pair considering the eugenic creation of disabled bodies and the latter pair examining ways that stereotypes and tropes of disability are created through narrative. In “‘You were less than human’: The Commodification of the Disabled Non-human in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*,” Agnibha Banerjee explores bioethical and material implications of cloning technology. Ishiguro’s novel centers on a group of clones who are segregated from society and have been created for the express purpose of compulsory organ donation, and as Banerjee argues, this program of bodily donation—presented to the clones as inevitable, even noble—forces readers to reckon with the boundaries of “human.” In “A Eugenics of Disability: Transformation, Futurity, and the Disabled Monster Body in *Resident Evil*,” Elliot Mason considers a different sort of othering as it occurs in the popular video game series *Resident Evil*. As Mason describes, disability within these games is present primarily among villains, who employ eugenics to modify their bodies in ways meant to increase their capacity to intimidate and control. By coupling manifestations of and desires for disability with the typically unhinged and volatile antagonists, Mason explains, and only in forms meant to be grotesque and terrifying, the games position the heroes as fighting to eradicate disability and assert the stability of the abled body. In “(Un)Diagnosing Religious Experience: Divine Encounters in Battlestar Galactica,” Lucas Cober considers ways that disability is constructed not through literal eugenic means but rather socially through the perpetuation of stereotypes surrounding religious experience. By focusing on Gaius Baltar, a character whose indeterminate spiritual and psychological experiences are a

primary driving force for the rebooted *Battlestar Galactica* series, Cober explores the interplay of religion and disability, as well as how these forces influence conceptions of humanity. The final chapter in the section is “Androids, Replicants, and Strange Things: Disability as Representative of Compromised Autonomy in Popular Science Fiction,” in which author Sean Mock explores the tendency within science fiction to conflate disability experience with a lack of agency. Mock examines numerous examples of contemporary science fiction to illuminate yet another pattern through which disability is framed as the other.

The second section of the collection examines ways that science fiction plays with ideas of care and community, and how these concepts may be employed in ways that shape readers’ and viewers’ understanding of disability. Each of the three chapters engages other schools of critical thought, most notably queer theory, to illustrate the disruptive potential to be found in these transdisciplinary perspectives. In “The Animation of Stone: An Affective Queer Crip Reading of N. K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* Series,” Jeana Moody examines the extent to which Jemisin disrupts notions of alive-ness and whole-ness through questioning concepts of animacy and temporality. Through conversation with works of feminist and queer theories, Moody argues that the world of the *Broken Earth* series reflects our world while, at the same time, questioning some of its most immutable hierarchies. Turning to one of science fiction’s most beloved franchises, Samuel Shelton argues in “Towards an Intergalactic Disability Justice: Rebelling Against Ableism Through a Criptique of the Jedi Order” that an overlooked aspect of the *Star Wars* universe is the extent to which the Jedi Order actually works to perpetuate ableism. The Jedi Order is widely understood as a community of heroes within the *Star Wars* universe, yet their valorization belies a harmful pattern of inequity and ableist harm, and through exposing this pattern, Shelton offers a new reading of Anakin Skywalker/Darth Vader and attempts to re-situate *Star Wars* in discussions of disability justice. Finally, in “Fish, Roses, and Sexy Sutures: Disability, Embodied Estrangement and Radical Care in Larissa Lai’s *The Tiger Flu*,” Stevi Costa and Edmond Chang explore the complexities of embodiment and body/mind dualism, arguing that the communities of care found in Lai’s work upend traditional narratives of cure and suggest a novel future for disability.

The final section of this collection takes a broader view of disability, looking at ways works of science fiction situate disability within the economic, political, and cultural influences of our contemporary world. In “Neoliberal Convergences of Capital & Capacity: Reading Science Fiction with the ADA,” T. Wesley considers works of science fiction literature through the lens of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), exploring ways that disability identity and experience may be further elucidated through conversation with economic and political ideology. Wesley uses the ADA as an analytical frame to examine

two primary works of science fiction and illustrate ways that conceptions of disability are inextricable from questions of wealth and capital. Finally, in the last chapter, “*Star Trek*, La Forge, and the (Dis)Able Future of Humanity,” Craig A. Meyer and Daniel Preston examine the complex portrayal of visually-impaired *Star Trek* character Geordi La Forge, considering ways that *Star Trek* has succeeded and failed in its representations of disability. Their chapter serves as a fitting end to this collection not only for its focus on such an iconic and sprawling narrative universe but also for its suggestion that while there is much cause to celebrate contemporary representations of disability, there is also still much room to question and to demand more.

Hopefully, the pieces of this collection, all together, convey both the progress of disability representation as well as the need for further work. As a realm full of wonder and novelty, science fiction offers a unique lens through which to understand our world and what it means to be human, and the discussions of the various media in the chapters here illustrate the many powers of this perspective—to reflect and clarify, but also to magnify and distort. They illustrate the magnitude of the genre’s influence and, in doing so, they highlight the importance of the conversation herein and call for it to continue.

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