Théri A. Pickens *New Body Politics: Narrating Arab and Black Identity in the Contemporary United States* 
New York: Routledge, 2014

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What is the aim of disability studies? What work does—or should, or can—the field do? For some scholars, disability studies requires an attention to and interrogation of ableism, including one's place in relation to it; for other scholars, an engagement with the material reality of disabled people's lives is necessary to count as "disability studies"; and for others, the job of disability studies is to trace the ideological systems that attribute normalcy or deviance to particular minds and bodies. In some iterations of the field, the experiences, identities, and representation of disabled people are centered; in others, the focus is more on the work of "ability" and "disability" than on disabled people themselves. These different positions sometimes overlap, and spelling them out here just makes me want to list still more (e.g., interrogating medicalized approaches to disability; framing disability as a minority identity; recognizing disability as inextricable from race, class, or gender; questioning a reliance on rights-based claims; etc.). But the exercise does point to the possibility that, as Julie Avril Minich puts it, we can frame disability studies more in terms of "its mode of analysis" than "its objects of study."1 Disability studies as more method than subject; crip as more analytic than identity.

And here, to support these possibilities, it might be useful to reach for Therí Pickens' *New Body Politics: Narrating Arab and Black Identity in the Contemporary United States*, which has recently been re-released in paperback and ebook. "Disability" appears neither in the book's title nor in the cataloging data from the Library of Congress, but it plays a central role in her project.2 Pickens' goal is to unravel the cultural logic "sustaining a hierarchical racial order with whiteness as supreme, a gendered order where cissexual straight masculinity resides at the apex, and an abled order where the putatively healthy and capable reign" (148), and she does so with the tools of disability studies. "Disability," she explains, "is both object of inquiry and analytic for this project" (2) because the kinds of "conversations about embodied experience" that are fostered in disability studies can "fundamentally shift our thinking about racialized, gendered, sexualized,
classed, and abled norms" (149). Her book, in other words, offers examples of how to use disability studies to read texts that are not "about" disabled people or disability; moreover, she uses disability studies not with the goal of writing about disability per se but rather to "midwife a cross-cultural conversation between Arabs and Blacks" (148).

For Pickens, disability studies offers readers the tools to recognize and analyze the embodied effects of racism and Islamophobia on the lives of Blacks and Arabs living in the U.S. Exile, displacement, hypervisibility and invisibility: all leave their traces on the body, and the African American and Arab American authors highlighted here have all used "the body's fragility as an inroad to critique" (11). Informed by her phenomenological approach to disability, Pickens structures her book around experiences of "quotidian embodiment," with the first chapters centered on respiration and touch and the last chapters focusing on illness, pain, and death (11). She foregrounds these experiences because they "cut across identity" (11), opening up possibilities for "coalition building and shared political enterprise" (40). Although Pickens does not call our attention to this balancing act, she works over the course of the book to conceptualize illness, pain, disability, and fragility as universal without being universalizing.

In the first chapter, for example, she offers a reading of Palestinian American poet Suheir Hammad, arguing that Hammad "turns to embodied experience as a way to imagine women's collective despite varied experiences" (29). Although Hammad's work appears in print in a variety of sources, Pickens focuses primarily on her spoken-word performances, revealing how Hammad "mobilizes breath—as metaphor, image, idea, and action—as an act of resistance" (21). More precisely, Pickens notes, Hammad uses breath to highlight both the resilience and the fragility of Palestinian peoples: if they breathe, they must exist; if they exist, they do so with fragile and precarious bodies, and this fragile precarity can be a site for politics. But Hammad refuses a politics that requires overcoming or forgetting the limits of the body, Pickens argues, insisting instead upon a continued reckoning with the toll exile and displacement take on the body.

For readers versed in disability studies, it is easy to map the traces of the field in Pickens' reading of Hammad and other texts. Throughout New Body Politics, she highlights authors who locate critique and resistance in the vulnerability of the body. She also consistently draws on concepts from disability studies—the effects of the medical gaze, the trope of overcoming—to read the effects of racism, sexism, and Islamophobia on her authors' characters. Pickens notes the prominence of hospital scenes in the work of Rabih Alameddine, for example, arguing that in his fiction, "the hospital emerges as a space to engage and understand feelings of exile and displacement." She then uses her disability studies approach, one that questions an insistence on curative imaginaries, to explain that "if the cure for exile is return or if the cure for illness is wellness, [Alameddine's characters] seem to prefer illness and exile," recognizing that "return and wellness do not offer rest or peace" (69). Pickens locates a similar refusal of "the fiction of normalcy" (66) in the breast cancer memoirs of Evelyne Accad and Audre Lorde, both of whom write searingly of their embodied experiences with pain as a way to critique the workings of the medical-industrial complex. Rather than
mask their experiences with prosthetics or triumphant narratives of overcoming, Accad and Lorde explore the "discursive or activist space pain can open" (116), especially when combined with an insistence on the possibilities of pleasure in non-normative bodies (13, 120).

As these examples suggest, *New Body Politics* joins continuing conversations in disability studies about how to address race and disability in relation. What does it mean to read embodied experiences of illness or pain as metaphors for racism? How are we to understand characterizations of racism as a sickness or discussions of the disabling effects of exile? Pickens' book does not address these questions directly, but rather offers examples of how to make these kinds of arguments. She profiles authors and texts that present "racism [as] an illness that damages the bodies of those it contaminates" (47), thereby implying that such positions can and do co-exist with an anti-ableist politics.

In taking up these kinds of positions, *New Body Politics* "displaces the putative white center of disability studies and conversations about disability" (149). Its focus on literary representations of and by African Americans and Arab Americans and its theoretical grounding in race and ethnic studies further this aim. Not only do references to scholars such as Christopher Bell, Tobin Seibers, and Margrit Shildrick exist alongside passages from W.E.B. Du Bois, Sharon Holland, and Edward Said, but Pickens uses disability theorists to illuminate moments of exile and displacement and insights from ethnic studies to extend her discussions of illness and pain. Given Pickens' focus and orientation, *New Body Politics* will obviously be useful to those working at the intersections of race, ethnicity, and disability, but its expanded view of disability beyond "the putative white center" means that the book also offers insight into discussions of fragility, sentimentality, and the possibilities and pitfalls of visibility as a strategy of resistance. Pickens closes the book by noting the fruitful possibilities of reading African American texts through an Arab American Studies framework and vice versa, but the book also gestures toward the kinds of new readings available through disability studies as methodology.

**Endnotes**


book appears in the *Routledge Series on Identity Politics* and is listed as "race and ethnic studies/current affairs" by the publisher. All of these labels accurately, if inadequately, describe the book, and I mention them here not to dispute their appropriateness but rather to note that many marketing departments and cataloguers do not yet recognize texts that use disability studies but don't center disability and disabled people as "disability studies."

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ISSN: 2159-8371 (Online); 1041-5718 (Print)