Productive Bodyminds in Samuel R. Delany's *Babel-17*

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Author's Note: This is a cleaned-up transcript of a presentation that represents my initial foray into this project.

Introduction: Delany and Disability

The goal of this paper is to discuss how Samuel R. Delany's 1966 science fiction novel *Babel-17* disrupts traditional categories of mind and body to offer us a vision of how human variation and bodily interdependence can promote cooperation and excellence. If you were to do a straightforward, as much as that's possible, summary of *Babel-17*, you would probably focus on the protagonist Rydra Wong and her search to discover the secret of Babel-17: the eponymous language of the novel. However, much of the novel, alongside that quest, focuses on her search for a spaceship crew and the technical and social interactions between the crew members. One of the key things that Delany does here, along with giving us a variety of bodies and minds functioning together as part of a connected unit, is encourages us to think about how we might redefine productivity and labor if we allow different kinds of bodyminds[1] to access productive spaces and labor in new ways that might not be available to "normal" humans. Today, I'll be presenting you with my initial thoughts on the text, shaped by my readings in disability studies.

The conversation around Delany, at least in terms of his presence in science fiction scholarship, is perhaps not as robust as we might expect given his stature in the field. What we do see is a lot of consideration of Delany in the context of queerness and race, which should not be surprising given those are major identity categories that he represents in science fiction that are generally underrepresented, and there are some discussions of his work in terms of utopia. There is also significant scholarship on Delany in the intersecting disciplines of queer and disability studies, but those scholars often do not address his science fiction. *Babel-17* is a text where we can bring those conversations together.

Most scholarly discussions of *Babel-17* focus on language, not surprisingly: it is named after the secret language that moves the plot of the book forward. But there are other things going on that we can tune into. I want to acknowledge the work of Joanne Woiak and Hioni Karamanos in their chapter "Tools to Help You Think" in the collection *Disability and Science Fiction* for their help in grounding my analysis. They've done what I think is the only disability reading formally published of Delany's science fiction work where they looked at *The Einstein Intersection*.[2] Essentially, they offer a disability studies reading of *The Einstein Intersection*. If you've read *The Einstein Intersection* and *Babel-17* you'll note that the role of bodily difference is much

more pronounced in the former, which was published in 1967. However, in 1966, when Delany published *Babel-17*, I think we can still see a lot of the things that he will develop more explicitly in *The Einstein Intersection*, but instead of being the explicit focus of the text, they're implicit and underline the larger action.

One of the concepts that I took from the Woiak and Karamanos chapter is their identification of *The Einstein Intersection* as "thematically inclusive of disability" (19), which is helpful because there are not traditionally disabled characters in either *The Einstein Intersection* or *Babel-17*. Woiak and Karamanos explain, "The story examines notions of bodies that are 'different,' but it does not signal that difference according to any single, familiar category" (20). And by filling the text with these different bodies, The Einstein Intersection "examines, models, and invites the reader to participate in the process of generating new cultural scripts about the lived experience of difference" (20). So, when I talk about the variety of bodyminds in *Babel-17*, it's not that I'm identifying a character and saying they have this disability or that they manifest neurodivergence in this way, but rather that the way the characters' bodies and minds in *Babel-17* disrupt key categories and key assumptions that we make about complete or autonomous bodies is "thematic of disability" and allows us to productively look at the text in that way. While *The Einstein Intersection* engages with this thematic of disability in an explicit way, working through scripts of bodily difference is central to that narrative; in *Babel-17*, on the other hand, this thematic is omnipresent in the background, and can be teased out through a consideration of the spaceship crew.

Moving into the novel itself, one reason to focus on disability in terms of productivity and labor is that the world-building that Delany offers us underneath the surface of the larger story is a labor-based world. We're in a far future scenario where there's been a war going on for a long time, and it appears that the key way people identify themselves is by their jobs, whether they are what's called "Customs" or "Transport" or military. This is not something that's explicated in the novel, but it shows up in key moments. For example, we meet a character at the beginning, "Danil D. Appleby, who seldom thought of himself by his name—he was a Customs Officer" (27) — note that he thinks in the capital letters — who comments when he has to go out with Rydra, "'I don't walk around Transport Town at night'" (27). So, we have these mental and physical separations between Customs people and Transport people that draw our attention to the role of labor and the way people interact in this text and the way that they define themselves.

The Spaceship Crew: Productive Bodyminds

Continuing with these ideas of labor and productivity, one effective way to think through the thematic disability in this text is to look at the characters and the crew that Rydra builds to work on her spaceship. First, I'll look at the role of the spaceship pilot. It is necessary to note that one of the things that we learn early on in the novel is that there is a wide prevalence of what is called cosmetisurgery, particularly among the Transport. And this is a theme that we see throughout Delany's work: for example, there is a lot of this in Triton and some in *Stars in My Pocket Like*

Grains of Sand. Delany consistently imagines a future with significant, universal, practical, and aesthetic body modification. In *Babel-17* one of the ways this manifests is that spaceship pilots are heavily modified to the point that, for example, the Pilot of Rydra's ship, Brass, looks like a tiger: "ivory saber teeth glistening with spittle, muscles humped on shoulders and arms; brass claws unsheathed six inches from yellow plush paws. Bunched bands on his belly bent above them. The barbed tail beat on the globe's wall. His mane, sheared to prevent handholds, ran like water" (35). So he's been modified to the point where he's now more tiger than he is human; although it's very clear from context that he started out as a human. On the one hand there is an aesthetic component to this—people are modifying their bodies in order to own them and control the way that their bodies look—but there's also a sense in which this is absolutely required because a spaceship pilot has to be heavily modified in order to pilot the spaceship. We see this in a scene where Rydra watches Brass wrestle before hiring him:

> You can really judge a pilot by watching him wrestle?" the officer inquired of Rydra.
>
> She nodded. "In the ship, the pilot's nervous system is connected directly with the controls. The whole hyperstasis transit consists of him literally wrestling the stasis shifts. You judge by his reflexes, his ability to control his artificial body. An experienced transporter can tell exactly how he'll work with hyperstasis currents." (40)

We have this dynamic where someone is required to become different from a "normal" human in order to do this job. Our character in the novel happens to be a tiger. There's one who is a dragon, so there's a lot of different options, but characters have to take on an extreme animalistic embodiment in order to be a pilot. And so if you want a captain for your spaceship you have to go find someone who has been appropriately modified.

One of the other roles in the spaceship is Navigator, and of course all of us who are familiar with science fiction tropes are used to seeing a Navigator on the board of the spaceship. But in *Babel-17*, Navigator is a role that is taken up by three people, and these people are not just linked professionally, they're linked personally and sexually through the relationship they call the "triple. " In this, we see that conventional notions of bodily boundaries are complicated by the fact that first there is a job that three people have to do together—they have to enmesh in such a way that they can complete this labor—and second, this requires a queer, polyamorous relationship. Triples don't only exist as part of the Navigator relationship; it turns out that the protagonist Rydra Wong was also in a triple at one point, but it's a necessary component of the Navigator role. The relationship is defined in the novel as "a triple, a close, precarious, emotional, and sexual relationship with two other people" (43), and then it's justified by one of the three Navigators explaining, "There're some jobs . . . you just can't give to two people alone. The jobs are too complicated" (43). And that's not really explicated for us anywhere, as that's not the focus of the novel—Delany doesn't walk us through how the Navigators work—but we get this sense that there's a way in which autonomous bodies are not helpful, and there needs to be some level of interdependence and connection in order to achieve this key spaceship function.

It is important to note that Delany is not proposing an unproblematic queer utopia in this novel. With the introduction of the triple, we see the division between Transport and Customs surfacing again, when one of the Navigators reacts to the Custom Officer's judgment: "'Perverts,' [Ron] said. 'That's what you Customs all really think . . . can't understand why you would want more than one lover'" (93).

We get another tripartite relationship with the Eye, Ear, and Nose. I will try to explain this clearly to the best of my ability, but one of the key ways in which Delany in *Babel-17* disrupts our fundamental categories is that we have both discorporate persons and bodily persons. Bodily persons are all of us people walking around just like we might expect every day, and discorporate people are people who have chosen to leave their bodies. They've chosen not to go through with a "normal" death. They've chosen to discorporate from their body, and they live in their own sector.[3] When you need to fly a spaceship, you need three discorporate people to be your Eye, your Ear, and your Nose, respectively. This results in some interesting synesthetic writing, which is not the point of this paper, but I do recommend it for the language. The key concept is that these discorporate people can do jobs that "normal" people can't. And the explanation echoes what we hear about the triple: "There're some jobs . . . you just can't give to a live human being . . . Like the Eye, Ear, and Nose. A live human scanning all that goes on in those hyperstasis frequencies would— well, die first and go crazy second" (42). So not only do we need different types of physical bodies, but we need different types of people in ways that don't even fit our fundamental categories of alive and dead.

As I wrap up this paper, I want to be sure to mention the protagonist of the novel, Rydra Wong. She is the glue that brings all of these people together, and she's also a linguist: hence her role in this story about revealing a secret language. In addition to the above-discussed representation of bodies and relationships, the novel's preoccupation with language, and the way that changed speech results in minds that function in different ways,[4] suggests that varied ways of thinking are just as ubiquitous and necessary as varied ways of being. But one of the key roles that Rydra plays in this novel is not just that she's the star linguist that's going to decipher this language, but that she is a spaceship captain, and not everyone can be a spaceship captain. As someone talking to Rydra describes it: "You're not the most stable person in the world. Managing a spaceship crew takes a special sort of psychology which—you have" (24). So there's this sense in which the way her mind works is not "normal," she's psychologically different in some way, but that is actually the required thing in order for success to happen at this job. She's also got some markers of traditional neurodivergence and disability: she has some savant-like qualities, such as total verbal recall and perfect pitch, and at one point in the novel she's actually called "near-autistic" (9), which is the closest Delany ever gets to a traditional recognition of disability or neurodivergence in this story. But there's definitely a sense in which the way her mind works is what makes her special.

Conclusion

As a preliminary conclusion, I offer that, ultimately, Delany imagines the spaceship as a kind of communal, workplace "criptopia"[5] where specialized bodies and minds working together can accomplish feats beyond normal humans. As I continue working on this project, I hope to flesh out my argument and really bring forward this interesting representation of different bodyminds that occurs before the disability rights movement. It may not be something that we always consider bringing into the conversation, but Delany's use of thematic disability throughout his work offers a valuable and innovative way for us to think about how bodyminds might function differently.

Notes

1. I came to the term "bodyminds" through Sami Schalk's book *Bodyminds Reimagined*. Schalk takes the term from Margaret Price (5). Although I do not use the term often in this version of the piece, the broader concept encourages us to resist a body/mind duality in thinking about disability and difference.

2. It's a fabulous chapter; I really recommend that you check it out if you can, especially if you'd like an introduction to the work that disability studies can do for science fiction scholars.

3. There's an interesting thing going on with geographic divisions of people alongside labor in this book.

4. In writing *Babel-17*, Delany was inspired by the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, which suggests that language determines the ideas we can have. (https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/linguistics/whorfianism.html)

5. A space where accessibility is the norm, enabling full participation of different bodyminds in society. (https://newmobility.com/criptopia/)

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