

# Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 46: Disability Studies

Guest: Dr. Sami Schalk and Dr. Subini Annamma

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by [Cheryl Green](#)

For more information: [disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast/](http://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast/)

## Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the *Disability Visibility Podcast* with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Hello my lovelies! Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host Alice Wong. Today's topic is about Disability Studies with two scholars, Dr. Sami Schalk and Dr. Subini Annamma. Disability studies is an interdisciplinary field that looks at disability from multiple perspectives and approaches.

I spoke with Sami and Subini in 2018 since the both authored books in the last two years. Sami is the author of [Bodyminds Reimagined: \(Dis\)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction](#) and Subini is the author of *The Pedagogy of Pathologization: Dis/abled Girls of Color in the School-prison Nexus*. Both Subini and Sami will talk about their experiences writing their books, the future of Disability Studies, and what excites them about teaching and generating new knowledge as academics. Are you ready? Away we go!

[electronic beeping]

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1!

ALICE: Why don't I have both of you, if you'd like to, introduce yourself. Sami, do you wanna go first?

SAMI SCHALK: Yeah, great. So, hi. I'm Sami Schalk. I am an Assistant Professor of Gender and Women's Studies at University of Wisconsin-Madison. I identify as a fat, Black, queer woman with chronic pain, and I use she/her pronouns. And my work really focuses on the intersections of gender, race, and disability, particularly in regard to blackness. And my book that just came out is called *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*, and it came out with Duke University Press this past March.

SUBINI ANNAMMA: So, hi, everyone. My name is Subini Annamma. I'm an Assistant Professor at the University of Kansas in Special Education. I'm a multi-racial Black and Asian woman of color. That's how I identify. I use pronouns of she/her/hers. I do identify as disabled. I'm chronically ill. I also had a book that just came out: *The Pedagogy of Pathologization: Dis/abled Girls of Color in the School-prison Nexus*.

### How it feels to have books out

ALICE: First of all, congratulations to both of you because this is a big-ass deal! I mean, how do you both feel now, having this book, which is kinda like this living creature, this product of your bodymind, out into the world?

SUBINI: This is Subini again, and I just feel really excited, a) I mean, I was so excited to see Sami's book come out, Moya Bailey's work. There's so much work being done where we're really starting to commit to intersectional perspectives and really understanding race and disability and other intersections that are just so important. My own work has been such a labor of love because that was working with 10 incarcerated youth, right, and girls of color in particular who are also disabled. And so, working with these girls and really just wanting people to understand what happens in youth prisons and how we are relegating our most marginalized kids into youth prisons and helping them understand how brilliant those girls were and how much I owed them for their time and what they shared with me and wanting so much to represent them and share their education trajectories in a really honest and open way, without pathologizing them. So, for me, it was just, it was so exciting to have the book finally in my hands because there were just stories that need to be told.

SAMI: This is Sami again. Having the book out has been, in many ways, a really surreal experience. I've been working on this for—the topic, in terms of disability and Black women's speculative fiction and Black women's writing—for about six years now. And so, for a long time, it felt like I was working in, not in isolation exactly, 'cause I've had such incredible support from people in Disability Studies, and I have been so well mentored in terms of people in the field encouraging me to do this work. But it felt like I was kind of making it up 'cause there was so little work at the point where I was starting this research on race and disability and particularly disability and blackness, that I felt like I was making it up and just hoping that it made sense to other people. And now, it's in people hands, and they're writing me and writing reviews and tweeting about it, and it seems like it's actually, in some ways, doing what I want it to do, which is getting people to think about how racism and ableism work together and why more Black feminists and African American Studies folks need to be incorporating disability into their work. And so, for me, it's been a really surreal thing because even though I'd been working on it for all this time, to now have it out in the world, it's surreal and exciting to see.

### Shout outs to book doulas who assisted the authors

ALICE: Mmhmm. And I'm a big believer in giving shout-outs and thank yous to people who've helped us along the way. And I'd like to ask both of you, did you have a book doula of sorts who kinda helped you through the process and if they're anybody you'd like to recognize. And also, just kind of like what you discovered about yourself during the writing process and the research process.

SAMI: This is Sami. I can go first. So, I was saying that I feel like I've been really well mentored in the field of Disability Studies, and there are several folks who were a part of this. Alison Kafer was the outside reader for my dissertation, so she was the one person when I was working on my dissertation who actually had knowledge of Disability Studies and gave me that perspective. And so, Alison has been, for years now, a total cheerleader for me and my work. But also, folks like Nirmala Erevelles, Ellen Samuels, Margaret Price: they have all been so supportive of me as a human, as a queer person of color in Disability Studies, that not only have they helped me in terms of looking at my work and responding to my work, but they also have just made me feel supported and welcome. That even if our work isn't exactly the same, that they believe in me, and they believe in the importance of my work.

ALICE: How about you, Subini?

SUBINI: It's a beautiful way to think of it as a book doula. I feel like I had like book doulas, right? There was so many folks who read sections. That was what was really interesting to me, was when I was able to acknowledge I was out of my depth and that I really needed somebody else to look over something I was saying and give me thoughts around it. So, like the gender and sexual diversity part, Sara Staley and Bethy Leonardi looked through and really thought through with me. Or there was other parts where Deb Morrison and Darrell Jackson and Darren Kennedy and Liz Mendoza, it was really, Jessica Harris, like all these folks that read really small pieces for me. That was a lot of what was really important to me, was this wanting to not pretend I knew something I didn't, and friends and colleagues that were willing to spend this extra time with me. And of course, there's some overlap, you know? I think that some of the people that Sami named like Nirmala Erevelles in particular, definitely Liat Ben-Moshe, Susan Schweik, some folks have just gone out of their way to make space for us in Disability Studies in a way that I think, where there hasn't been space before. And they recognize the need for this work, and so that's been really, really meaningful as well. So, and of course, David Connor and Beth Ferri are the people I originally wrote DisCrit with.

I think part of what I learned in this process was that there's not—at least for me—it wasn't one doula; it was this community, right, this community of practice, this community of support that we build up around us and that people really who are committed to your vision and see what you have to say as valuable, but also support you in the labor, right, and in the process and are willing to give their own labor. You know, academia almost, in some ways, so built on free labor, and we all kind of have to do it for each other. But people are willing, and some of these leaders of Disability Studies have gone out of their way to nurture us next generation folks. And I will also say that same thing for me because I really span the boundaries between Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory, that's really true of Critical Race Theory too for me. So, Dave Stovall, Marvin Lynn, Cheryl Matias, Daniella Cook: there's just, I mean I could go on and on, Thea Berry. There's just so many people, I feel like, who've been willing to say, "No, I'm interested in what you have to say, and your work matters."

[peaceful music break]

### Is there a void of not enough academics of color in Disability Studies?

ALICE: Yeah. I think it does, it really says a lot about our communities, and there's a lot that's cringe-worthy and just I roll my eyes sometimes. But yet, there is such generosity and such a real genuine love and interest and wanting to see scholarship by all kinds of people. And I think what's really great is for both of you, there may be work in Disability Studies about Black women and may be stuff, research about Brown and Black girls of color. But very often, that people writing and doing the research are not disabled people of color, are not women are color. And I think that's what's really lovely and what's kind of missing, I think, in a lot of the scholarship. And do you think that's kind of something that's still kind of a void in Disability Studies in terms of not enough academics of color who are doing this work?

SUBINI: Yeah. So, I would say absolutely. I mean, I'm in Special Education, which is a very interesting field, and it doesn't bring, often doesn't bring, the critical perspectives that Disability Studies does, and it definitely lacks representation. I think in general, the academy doesn't include people of color, and it doesn't include disabled folks. And when you're at the intersections as disabled folks of color, you're the unicorn, right? Like I'm the only woman of color in my entire department.

ALICE: Wow.

SUBINI: Yeah. And so, I'm going up for tenure this year, and if I get it, I'll be the first woman of color to go up for and get tenure in this department. It's 2018. You know what I mean? That's concerning. So, the academy is like a microcosm of society. I often say this about prisons, but the academy is like this in the other way, right? It usually has mostly the super-privileged within it. And those of us who've fought and scrapped to get here, we all have our privileges, but I think there's still a very small amount of us who are at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities who are able to get our voices heard.

ALICE: Yeah.

SAMI: Yeah. This is Sami. I remember going to Society for Disability Studies conferences and almost consistently being the only Black person in the room and often, one of only one or two people of color in the room. And you know, there was a time that I could count on one hand the scholars of color that I knew publishing in Disability Studies. So, Nirmala Erevelles, Cindy Wu, Mel Chen, Julie Avril Minich: those were kind of the folks that I knew who were ahead of me in some ways. But by going to conferences, I started meeting more folks who, at the time, were graduate students, and I was a graduate student as well. And so, I think with my book and Subini's book, that now we're starting to see there's a new generation of Disability Studies scholars of color that several years ago, we all kind of met and started talking as graduate students. And now folks are getting jobs and publishing more, so folks like Gina B. Kim, Akemi Nishida, Angel Miles, Juliana Nessi. These are all people that I met as a graduate student and now, suddenly, we have degrees, and we're writing. So, I think that there's starting to be this slow generational shift. I think there are some junior scholars of color who are doing good work in the world, but it's still, I still feel like I know everyone, right? Then I'm like, oh, these are all my friends. I'm excited for the day when I go to a conference and meet someone who's working in Disability Studies, and I haven't met them before: a scholar of color doing Disability Studies that I am not already their friend.

[chill ambient music break]

### Hopes for growth and understanding in Disability Studies

ALICE: I do think that while most universities will have Ethnic Studies, Women's Studies, and Black Studies, most people don't even know that Disability Studies is actually a thing. Sometimes, some universities will have a few courses here and there. They might have a minor or a major, but very few actually have graduate programs. So, I am kinda curious from both of your perspectives what you would like to see more of in terms of the growth and understanding of Disability Studies as a field.

SUBINI: Mmhmm. Yeah. This is Subini, and I can simply say that for me, Disability Studies, as it grows, I just wanna see it continue to commit to an intersectional perspective, you know. I mean it was not that long ago that Disabled Lives Matter editorial got written in an academic journal, not only coopting the Black Lives Matter language but pitting disabled people and trans folks against each other and arguing that we need to focus on disabled people's access to bathrooms and not trans access to bathrooms. Just this very unidimensional lens of disability that was disability is.... I think so often, when we're trying to argue for disability as an important vantage point and as a really essential oppression, there's a lot of like, "Well, it's parallel to blackness, and it's this and it's that." And we need to be very careful about being reductive. And I think that's the danger that Disability Studies will always have to run into and have to really confront.

And that's true of Black Studies, of Ethnic Studies, about Women's Studies, right? It's this idea that we can boil ourselves down to a particular perspective or a paradigm, a unidimensional paradigm. So, what I would love to see Disability Studies do is make those connections more clearly across as a field and get at those intersections more clearly without sacrificing disability as a really important identity and ableism as a really important marginalization that we need to understand.

SAMI: Yeah, I definitely would like to see the comparative or competitive thinking around oppression cease in Disability Studies. I think there's sometimes, because both the Disability Rights Movement and Disability Studies emerged after the Civil Rights Movement and Critical Ethnic Studies and after the Women's Movement and the emergence of Women's Studies in the field, I think Disability Studies as a field has always taken inspiration from these other fields and these other movements but sometimes in a way that yeah, feels like, "Well, we want our space too" rather than understanding it as a coalitional effort that involves women with disabilities and people of color with disabilities. So, I want to see, I would like to see that sort of rhetoric end in the field.

But I also, part of what I wanna see in terms of the growth of the field is acknowledgment of disability in these other interdisciplinary fields. You know, I'm in Gender and Women's Studies, and the attention to sexuality and race and class in Gender and Women's Studies, I think, is pretty good in a lot of spaces, and yet, disability remains unrecognized. And so, I would like to see Disability Studies be more integrated into these other fields and then integrate the insides of these other fields into Disability Studies. I think one of the challenges with early Disability Studies being as white and Euro-centric as it was and sometimes continues to be is that what we need are folks who are trained as Critical Race scholars from the get-go. And that's where I get excited when I go and give talks, and there are students from either Women's Studies or other, like African-American Studies or other Ethnic Lit departments who come in, and they're like, "Oh, well, I see disability in this DuBois text or in Fanon," in some of their foundational texts that I'm like, yes! That's what I want.

I want people who have been trained in Ethnic Studies and Critical Race Studies to have disability as an analytic lens alongside race and gender from the start, not later on. I am unusual in that I was able to take undergraduate classes in Disability Studies, but now I'm teaching these classes all the time. So, we have a new generation of students who are getting this exposure earlier and earlier.

[chill music break]

ALICE: Yeah, thank you for that.

### What gives you life and keeps you going?

ALICE: Well, I wanna ask you both a final question and leave it on a positive note. Because I think while there definitely are problematic aspects of fighting the academy, it's like, what gives you life as a professor? What do you just cherish, and what keeps you going doing what you do?

SAMI: I can start. For me, there are two sides of it. One is seeing some of the new work coming out that just sets off fireworks in my brain. That gives me a lot of life because like I was saying earlier in our conversation, when I first started this, I felt like I was kind of making things up 'cause there just wasn't a whole lot out there for me to use in building my thinking about the intersections of race, gender, and disability. But now, folks are doing this work alongside me.

And so, understanding that this is an ongoing conversation; we're reading all this work. I recently went to a talk by Julie Avril Minich on loving the diabetic body in Latinx creative writing, and it just was like spark, spark, spark, spark, spark! Like so much incredible, exciting thinking. So, I think seeing the new work that's coming out in terms of the intersection of race and disability in particular gives me a lot of life, a lot of hope.

And then the other end of it is doing this teaching. Because as much as I hope that someday there will be more Disability Studies and disability rights awareness in high school education, I often get to be the first person to introduce disability as a lens, as a critical concept, to my students. And I get to just watch those sparks happen for them, and that gives me a lot of joy to watch their thinking process change and to get the evaluations and have people say how much it's changed the way they've looked at the world or interacted with the world or changed the way they thought. I had a student recently come in, and she identifies as disabled and has been having to have a lot of interactions with the medical-industrial complex right now with some health changes. And she said, "Every time I go into the hospital, I just think, 'biopolitics, biopolitics!'" She's using these concepts from class to actually help her navigate the world as a disabled woman. And how it doesn't necessarily give her more power when she's in these interactions, but she's able to see what's happening and have a language for it, not just that weird feeling that something feels off, right? She can actually name what's going on and process it in the new way. And that, for me, is one of the most rewarding and exciting things about teaching Disability Studies is realizing the way that actually can shift the way that our students think and move about and experience the world.

ALICE: Thank you. How about you, Subini?

SUBINI: I mean I wanna just acknowledge just how deeply privileged I am, right? I get paid to read and write. Let's be real about this! I mean, for somebody who spent her first year in an orphanage, the idea that I would ever get paid to just generate knowledge is so mind-blowing. So, I wanna be really clear: I love my job. I love the academy. I don't love the academy. I love the idea of knowledge production and thinking and making ideas in this really beautiful way, right? But we still do it within these violent contexts of the academy. But I do wanna just acknowledge my deep privilege that I have. But really, it's about this idea of generating new knowledge.

One of the things I say to my students all the time is, "You have this unique set of experiences that you can now use to direct and understand through these different theoretical and analytical lenses," and that's what's gorgeous. What Sami's talking about—and I agree—like this idea of teaching students for the first time, teaching folks for the first time, about disability as an analytical lens, about ableism as a companion to white supremacy allows them to have tools that we didn't have. You know what I mean? In some ways, I think so much of the writing I do is healing my own soul and healing the soul of other folks who've never had this experience. And because of that, they're gonna go and push my thinking. They're gonna make DisCrit irrelevant 'cause they're gonna come up with something so much better. You know what I mean? That's what's beautiful about knowledge production, and in that sense, I think it's just really great, generating new knowledge.

And then, because I root my research because I am always gonna have one foot in the education world. I wrote my research in schools with kids, with high school kids. And right now, I'm teaching a class, a Socio-critical Literacy class in a youth prison, and I'm working with girls of color, many of who have a disability label. And we're really focused on the pedagogy that we can do that distributes ability in a different way. If we think of ability as something you can



actually distribute, how do we distribute it to our girls in class, and how do we allow them to shine with their savvy and ingenuity and build our pedagogy around them? That is just, I love what I do. I'm so lucky I get to do it.

And so, that's what's really amazing is like, the badassness, if you will, of the kids in schools who navigate these violent places. I mean, these girls are living in a prison, the heart of the prison-industrial complex. They're actually in the prisons, right? And they're still so brilliant and so badass and so thoughtful and so, they're just amazing. And so, it just really is, these kids, these incarcerated kids are just, are brilliant. And so, we just have to give them a chance to lead, and there is just this kind of revolutionary commitment to allowing them a critical lens so they can talk about what they're seeing.

SAMI: Yeah. This is Sami. I just wanna add a little bit to that. Earlier, Subini, you had mentioned people who had made space for us, right? And so, I think one thing that I'm feeling in this conversation is the way that generations make space for the next generation, who make space for the next generation to kind of continue. And so, the ways that we were supported by people who were further along in their academic careers, and now we're supporting our students in ways that, again, hopefully we can be critical of the generation before us and build upon their work. And then the people who come after us will hopefully be critical of us. I'm certain that there are things that we're not doing well enough or not aware of that our students and the people that we're teaching will be able to see for us because we've given them these critical tools earlier and set some groundwork for them. So, that intergenerational education and growth, I think, is really important and also gives me a lot of hope in a time right now that things feel really, really dark. And as someone who reads and works on speculative fiction, it definitely feels like we're living in a dystopian future right now, so.

SUBINI: Mmhmm.

ALICE: So thankful that both of you, what both of you shared today.

SUBINI: I just also wanna acknowledge I know we talked about a lot of academics today, but I think we'd be—I'd be—remiss if I didn't mention a million activists. And I don't even like that line between academics and activists, and I think we need to think about it as different thought leaders and intellectuals and how that might position us in a different space. But I just wanna like: Leroy Moore, TL Lewis, Dustin Gibson, Lydia Brown. We have this amazing group. Vilissa Thompson. I know I'm gonna miss somebody. Imani Barbarin. Just like this amazing group, yourself, of disabled folks of color who are really leading the way outside of academia. And if there's anything I could say to academics in general—Disability Studies, sure, but also Education—is that we need to also be engaged with the folks outside of academia in a more quality way, which I think is what you're saying about language. But also, just listening and shutting the hell up from time to time.

ALICE: Yeah. And I'm so glad that both of you are within the academy, really just making those connections and really bridging these gaps. Thank you both again so much for talking with me today.

SAMI: Thank you. This was so great.

SUBINI: This was. Thank you.

Wrap-up  
[hip hop]

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the Disability Visibility Project, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at [DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast](https://DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast).

You can also find out more about Dr. Sami Schalk and Dr. Subini Annamma on our website.

The audio producer for this episode is Sarika D. Mehta. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

Subscribe to our podcast on iTunes, Stitcher, Spotify, or Google Play. You can also support our podcast for \$1 a month or more by going to our Patreon page at [Patreon.com/DVP](https://Patreon.com/DVP). That's p-a-t-r-e-o-n dot com, slash DVP.

Thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets! Bye!!!

♪ How far will they go?  
Oh, yeah yeah  
How far will they go?  
Oh, yeah yeah  
How far will they go?  
Oh ♪