



Understanding Oppression

BY SAMI SCHALK

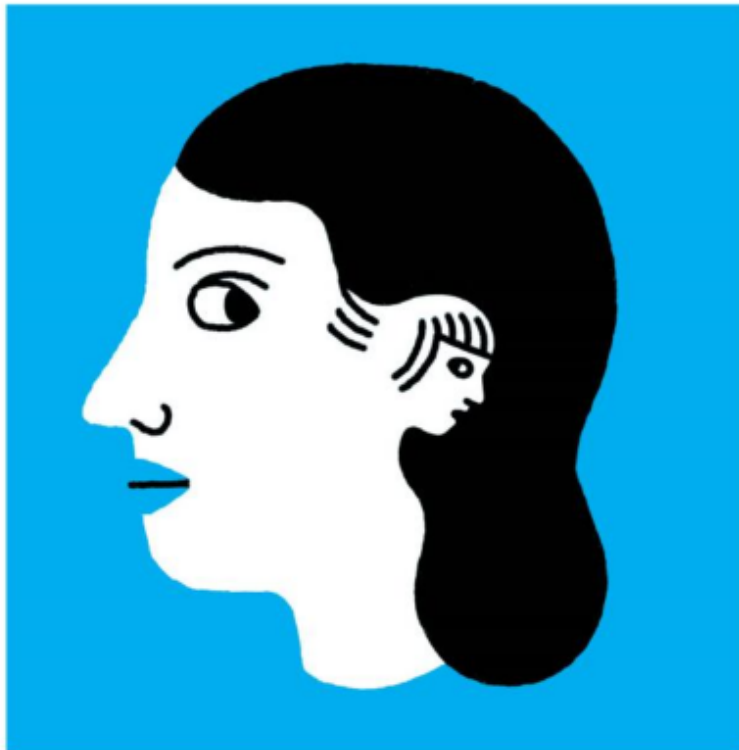


ILLUSTRATION: CRISTINA SPANO

I study issues of race, disability and gender in contemporary American literature and culture. I have written about how these issues are dealt with in films such as *Avatar* and in the Wisconsin-based American Girl brand. My current research project explores how Black activists, specifically the Black Panther Party and the National Black Women's Health Project, have addressed disability as a political concern in ways that differ from the mainstream, predominantly white, disability rights movement.



Dr. Sami Schalk, Associate Professor of Gender and Women's Studies, also writes about positive body image. Last fall, a video of her twerking with musician Lizzo at a Madison concert went viral on social media.

As an interdisciplinary scholar, I ask questions such as: What are the relationships between racism, sexism, ableism (discrimination against disabled people) and other forms of oppression? How have marginalized groups (women, disabled people, people of color, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer people, transgender and non-binary people) sometimes done harm to one another or to marginalized people within their group (such as queer people of color) in their fight for collective liberation? I aim to improve understanding of the relationships between oppressions in our modern world so that, perhaps, in conversation with the many brilliant scholars, artists, and activists I read and work with, we can develop new strategies for political and social change that can address multiple oppressions at once and refuse to leave anyone behind.

I bring this work to the classroom by encouraging my students to ask questions of their own assumptions. What beliefs do you hold that you have never questioned? How did you come to know what (you think) you know about people who are different from you? From TV and movies? From your parents or community of origin? Who benefits from these beliefs and who suffers? Are the beliefs you hold helping you be your highest and best self—helping you make the world better—or are these beliefs holding you back from that? What I love about teaching in the Department of Gender and Women's Studies at UW-Madison is that my students come open, earnest and eager to learn. I learn from and with my students constantly, and every year at least one student e-mails me to say that my class changed their thinking, even changed their life or career path. Everyone needs to have a basic understanding of systems of oppression because all of us will interact with people different from us and potentially hold power over people less privileged than ourselves. We need to understand our role within these systems in order to change them for the better. ■