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End of Normal: Identity in a Biocultural Era, by Lennard J. Davis, University of Michigan Press 2013 pp., £29.50

In this very readable book, Davis sets out to explore issues of identity, grounding them in the context of the biocultural, which he defines as: “the intersection among the cultural, social, political, technological, medical and biological” (p.vii).

The text begins with a series of warnings to would-be readers who Davis, a self-confessed ‘contrarian’, suspects will take offence. Davis imagines that among those likely to be offended are: those invested in identity politics and diversity; those taking drugs for depression; those from the disability community against physician-assisted suicide and physicians engaged in diagnostic practices (especially those who diagnose affective disorders) and finally those attached to the view that Freud ‘was a patriarchal sexist’ (p.viii). However, several of these warnings may be unnecessary for readers already familiar with Davis’ previous work.

Davis uses *End of Normal* as an opportunity both to revisit and to revise arguments that he has rehearsed previously, often in response to the critiques that others have made of his work. The book is also a space for him to contribute to contemporary debates about a number of thorny issues in the field of disability studies through the biocultural lens.

So, in Chapter One, ‘The End of Normal’, Davis returns to his work on normalcy (Davis, 1995) and considers whether *normal* is losing its pervasive grip as ‘a discursive organiser’ (p.1). Here, Davis explores the idea that ‘diversity is the new normality’ (p.1). Davis argues that diversity serves neoliberal ideals well as, behind supposedly superficial differences, like gender, race and class, we are *all* consumers. While Davis believes that it is a good thing that there has been a shift away from *normal* towards *diversity* in doing the work of ‘sorting populations’ (p. ix), he questions where disabled bodies sit within the diversity paradigm. He argues that, unlike race, class and gender, in the diversity paradigm, disability is still seen as a fixed identity, one which is medically understood and not a matter of choice. Davis maintains that, under neoliberal capitalism, disability (and poverty) represents that which must be oppressed in order for diversity to survive as a concept. He concludes by maintaining that disability occupies a realm in which *normal* is still applied with considerable conviction.

In Chapter Two, ‘Dismodernism Reconsidered’, Davis responds to critiques of the dismodern position he outlined in 2002 (Davis, 2002). Understandably, Davis has little time for post-positivist realists whose arguments so often depend on the creation of a straw person they call ‘postmodernist’. However, he engages seriously with more nuanced challenges by Robert McCruer and Anna Mollow. At the end of the chapter, despite the criticisms, he continues to uphold his dismodern stance claiming that the uncertainty he invokes as part of understanding disability identity should be welcomed, rather than seen as premature or dangerous.

In the chapters that follow, Davis asks: why don’t disabled actors play disabled roles (Chapter Three)? In Chapter Four, he discusses ‘Depression and Disability’ drawing attention, as many others have done, to the vagaries of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* and pointing, controversially, as he acknowledges, but usefully to the sociological explanations of depression. In Chapter Five, he is ‘Stumped by Genes: DNA, Disability and Prosthesis’ and applies the biocultural approach to the relationship between genetics and medical research.

Next, he makes a welcome contribution to current debates about the ontological status of diagnosis within psychiatry, drawing on his previous writing (Davis, 2008) (Chapter Six). In Chapter Seven, he makes a (controversial) case for physician assisted suicide and, finally, he seeks to re-position a 'Transgendered Freud' (Chapter Eight).

In the penultimate chapter (Chapter 9), following in the footsteps of Marx and Engels, and, more recently, Donna Haraway, Davis and his chapter co-author, David Morris, offer a manifesto: 'The Biocultures Manifesto'. Davis and Morris summarise their manifesto, in which they call for a biocultural sensibility, in a bullet pointed list and encourage the reader to 'fire [the points off] to friends and foe' (p. 127). They remind us that 'Selves today are embodied, biologised, shaped by medical knowledge' and that 'The body – whose, what, when, where – is always in question' (p. 127).

In the final chapter, Davis reflects on 'Biocultural Knowledge'. Davis begins by expressing some regret that his most famous student, Barack Obama, appears not to have done the reading of Foucault that Davis assigned to him as a student (Obama continues to state that facts should never be obscured by politics or ideology). Undeterred, Davis concludes by re-stating the importance of the role of culture in the development of biopower and urges the reader to "Know thy biocultural self."

The book is written in a clear and engaging style which will appeal to undergraduate students, post-graduates and academics alike from a range of disciplines including: disability studies, cultural studies, psychiatry and psychology and medical humanities. The book is easy to read from cover to cover but chapters can stand alone and allow the reader to dip in and out of some of the contemporary debates within disability studies that capture their interest.

References

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