

David Bolt and Claire Penketh, eds., *Disability, Avoidance and the Academy: Challenging Resistance, Disability, Avoidance and the Academy* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016), 199 pages. ISBN: 9781138858664 (hbk). Hardback/E-book \$130.40/\$38.47.

Disability, Avoidance and the Academy presents a broad-spectrum, global, and largely sociological, exploration into the avoidance of disability studies and disability theory by the academy. This collection of essays identifies and assesses the manner in which the academy engages with disability studies — demonstrating how this engagement is both insufficient and inappropriate. Contributions to the book are grouped into three sections: the first identifies double standards within academic institutions and how these double standards result in negative experiences for students, staff, and disabled persons; the second constitutes a review of the manner in which disability studies improves and informs academic disciplines; and the final section largely constitutes a work of praxis in which a broader cultural engagement is seen as an appropriate avenue for the academy to resolve its prejudice and protocols by privileging the inter-disciplinary merit of disability studies.

In the introduction, David Bolt notes that the term ‘disability’, when used by academics, is often construed as ‘Otherness’ (p. 1). Contributions to the book largely advance this theme and show how ‘Othering’ actively displaces positive perspectives on disability and reinforces an institutional attitude of prejudice and *in-ability*. *Disability, Avoidance and the Academy*, however, advances a specific focus of “multifaceted resistance ... in the academy” — envisioned as an “implicitly personal and explicitly disciplinary avoidance of disability” (p. 2). This focus seeks to broadly highlight how the multidisciplinary relevance of disability studies as an academic discipline is diminished. The position held is that the knowledge and authority of disabled people (and presumably, but not explicitly, others working in disability studies) are not being permitted to influence developing academic thought, “as though a fundamental order would be disrupted” (p. 27) if they were; and that this resistance to disability constitutes and perpetuates an institutional prejudice against both disabled people and the discipline of disability studies.

In his chapter, Joel Petrie discusses how disabled employees can be disruptive for non-disabled policy makers, and Alan Hodkinson elucidates how school textbooks do not often or accurately represent disabled persons. Owen Barden indicates how dyslexic students are subject to remedial teaching practices and are precluded from more typical educational experiences. Claire Penketh and Laura Waite investigate how the field of ‘special needs’ has become a new topic of academic study. Rita Hoffmann and Maria Flamich investigate how

disability studies can contribute to current educational practices, and Kathy Boxall and Peter Beresford highlight how social-work studies are responding to mental health problems. Shifting the focus to higher education, Tom Coogan and Robert Cluley endorse the British Social Model of disability when it comes to reconsidering disabled persons in marketing management, Cath Nichols observes how the notion of ‘disability as deficit’ is built into creative writing structures, and Ann Fox develops the understanding that in the US disability is largely avoided in theatre studies. Hemachandran Karah attempts to show how a transcendent ethic of care might develop from a combination of Gandhi studies and disability studies. In the final section of the book, Emmeline Burdett claims that critical avoidance can be so bizarre that it can cause literary reviewers to fail to recognise horrific historical facts; Arianna Introna explores how literary criticism largely fails to properly regard ‘disability’ as a legitimate category of analysis; and Chris Ewart attempts to render disability more difficult to ignore in his re-approach to modernist literary studies of the Other. The book is rounded off by a contribution from Will Kanyusik, who explores how disability can be represented in American Modernist fiction as a signifier of Otherness.

Let me examine in more detail the essay ‘Disability, Diversity, and Division,’ by David Mitchell. Mitchell claims that the avoidance of disability in ‘diversity pursuits’ in academic institutions is a function of that institution’s perceived role in providing a “professional middle class ... rite of passage into bourgeois lifestyle” (p. 10). According to Mitchell, institutional marketing, or ‘branding’, promotes an institution as the kind of place through which students can achieve such a lifestyle (p. 10). He suggests that branding intentionally portrays a token level of cultural diversity while consciously re-enforcing a normalised view. This branding of ‘diversity’ rarely includes any reference to disabled persons, and as such, ‘diversity’ becomes an increasingly weakened concept that could be perceived as little more than a rhetorical effort to capture real-world diversity (p. 9). ‘Inclusion for the purposes of institutional diversity’ thus responds to disability only to the extent that it must — rather than developing real, substantive, curricular and policy Transformation; consequently failing to achieve any “meaningful degree of inclusion of ... unrepresented populations” (p. 9).

Mitchell explicitly identifies as the point of his article the notion that the academy is reluctant to embrace progressive disability studies models (presumably, ones such as the Social Model of Disability and the Picture Theory of Disability), yet his article actually offers little argumentation in support of that belief. Much of the essay pivots upon an equivocation between the terms ‘professionalisation’ and ‘normalisation’, and though this equivocation is quite explicit throughout, it is nowhere cashed out. Mitchell, himself, adds the caveat

that, 'though 'professionalisation' and 'normalisation' may not be synonymous, one may be the root of the other' (p. 11). Given that what grounds normalcy is a much broader discussion than a simple lack of representation of disability at an institution, his argument becomes tenuous were 'normalcy' to be the root of 'professionalisation' (rather than the other way around).

Sushi Oswal, whose contribution follows Mitchell's in the book, identifies how key passages of the American Association of University Professors's policy responds to disabled faculty members and concludes that, despite attempting to increase inclusion, an institution can often dissolve into bureaucratic wrangling to avoid litigation (or the fear of litigation). Both Mitchell's and Oswal's contributions provide evidence for the claim that the academy's policies are more 'token' than functional, and that policies are constructed in the form of concessions to diversity rather than substantively embracing diversity.

None of the authors, however, engages the more transparent and actively prohibitive issues such as: the disinclination of publishing houses to print manuscripts which present neoteric or revisionary models of disability; the unwillingness of non-disability studies journals to publish research on disability; the hesitancy with which institutions offer academic courses seeking to advance topics on disability; and the unwillingness of foundations and agencies to fund research which seeks to develop disability knowledge. While the general thrust of the book tends towards avoidance in the Academe, its failure to address more substantive issues demonstrates a worrying predisposition to tilt at windmills rather than to offer solutions to the more tangible effects of academic avoidance of disability.

Disability, Avoidance and the Academy comprises 16 individual perspectives which provide deep sociological insights into the mechanisms which engender a resistance to disability studies and disabled people within the academy. It is at times difficult to clearly resolve what arguments are being made, as the rhetoric and writing styles can sometimes obfuscate otherwise laudable thought and detract from the power of the book. The contributions generally offer discussion which supports the focus of the book: 'the multifaceted resistance that occurs in the academy' (p. 2); however, related discussions deriving or proposing ameliorations to that resistance seem to be consistently missing. Throughout almost all of the contributions there is a tangible 'Social Model' agenda which is rarely cashed out or made explicit (though several contributions, such as Coogan & Cluley's essay (p. 99–111) are more transparent). This is problematic given that, though Social Models of disability are generally regarded as an improvement on Medical Models, they have also received heavy criticism (see: Shakespeare, Tom. *Disability Rights and Wrongs Revisited*. Second ed. Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge, 2014.; Terzi, Lorella. "The Social Model

of Disability: A Philosophical Critique." *Journal of Applied Philosophy*. 21(2) (2004): 141–157.; et al.). Indeed, from this criticism it is not at all clear that, were the Social Model implemented, it would resolve any (or even some) of the issues raised in this book.

Routledge has provided an end-of-section reference and a useful index; unfortunately, the press has paid less attention to their proof-editing and Latin terms have been carelessly spelled or are improperly formed. *Disability, Avoidance, and the Academy* is light on substantive philosophical argumentation and is aimed at the disability studies researcher who has sociological interests. Nevertheless, the book offers an excellent insight into systems of power which make it difficult to develop research and knowledge in disability studies; several of the essays should become must-reads in any Introduction to Disability Studies course.

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