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"To know is to analyze" or How to Know without the Truth

Davis, Lennard J. The End of Normal: Identity in a Biocultural Era. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2013. pp. 155.

Disability studies has a history of distinguishing the "dichotomy" between the biological and the cultural identity of the body and the attempts to deal with this conflict. Identity is divided into two registers of knowledge: the corporeality of the body and cultural ideas about the normal body. In his former two books, Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body (1995) and Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism & Other Difficult Positions (1995), Lenard Davis tries to locate these focal points of entanglement between the biological and cultural. In Enforcing Normalcy, Davis attempts to analyze the historical origin and instrumentalization of the concept of the normal body (2), whilst in Bending over Backwards, he introduces the critical concept of dismodernism – a way of rethinking postmodern concerns with identity and how these relate to disability studies (27-31). In his third book, The End of Normal: Identity in a Biocultural Era, Davis explores a wholly new avenue of identity under the concept of biocultures.

The End of Normal is divided into ten chapters which function as stand-alone essays that should be read with a reading key of biocultures. For Davis biocultures "describe the intersection among the cultural, social, political, technological, medical and biological" (The End of Normal VII). The first two chapters ("The End of Normal," "Dismodernism Reconsidered") are auto reflexive readings of his previous two books, Enforcing Normalcy and Bending over Backwards. The End of Normal replaces the idea of normalcy for diversity (1). For Davis, contemporary neoliberal western societies no longer depend on the ideology of normalization, but the opposite, diversity. But what

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holds this diversity in place is the rigidness of the category of disability which acts as a place of origin for diversity. The second chapter, “Dismodernism Reconsidered,” deals exclusively with criticisms of his concept of dismodernism.

To avoid confusion it is best to read the last two chapters first, as a sort of hermeneutic key. The chapter “The Biocultures Manifesto,” co-written with David Morris, sets up the program (as manifestos do) for the whole project. It states that in the 21st century it is time “to join the biological and the cultural … because … the biological without the cultural, or the cultural without the biological, is doomed to be reductionist at best and inaccurate at worst” (The End of Normal 122). The authors propose that the way to avoid the pitfalls of reductionism and inaccuracy is to first deal with the false division between the hard sciences and soft humanities. Each position, the authors maintain, can only move towards knowledge when one learns from the other in an attempt to understand phenomena. This process is necessary if there is to be an “informed citizenry” (The End of Normal 126), a citizenry that needs (today more than ever) to understand different advances in science which have ethical repercussions. The Manifesto concludes with 22 bullets in the theoretical arsenal of biocultures.

More than anything, the Manifesto is a battle cry for a complex interdisciplinarity as a way to get closer to truth. Herein lies the problem of the project of biocultures. It is based on specific modalities of truth which appear to operate on a different level to what the authors intend.

The first point states that, “Science and humanities are incomplete without each other” (The End of Normal 127). Even if this point derives from a “naive” idea that these two endeavors somehow deal with the same object (world), it is not quite clear how they could/should cooperate. This is not to say that interdisciplinarity is impossible, but basing this on a universal claim of truth falls short of its target. This is connected to points 10 and 11 which propose that dividing truth and knowledge provides half-truths and divided knowledge (The End of Normal 127). This is getting awfully close to some universal idea of truth; however, this line of thought is not developed in the chapters. For example, in Chapter Seven, “A Disability Studies Case for Physician – Assisted Suicide,” Davis promotes a legalistic framework for PAS (Physician Assisted Suicide). He tackles criticism within disability studies which rejects or is wary of PAS and argues that PAS, which takes into account all sides in a legal framework, allows for a dignified death rather than representing a euthanasia

project. The chapter ends with a thought that, even though there might be opposition to his argument, “it is only through argument and debate that we can find, if not the truth, then the information behind what may be truth” (The End of Normal 107). The question arises about whether truth is the beginning or the end. What is the truth of PAS? If suicide is contextual (dependent on a variety of cultural norms and individual motivation), then it is hard to point to some truth of the origin of suicide – genealogy, yes, but not truth. The eschatology of suicide is even more dubious because it is unable operate without purpose; however, with purpose it is unable to be anything but a universal claim, for example, the sin of suicide.

Another chapter, “Disability in the Media,” deals with the status of the representation and presence of disabled actors in the media. Arguing for change of the representation of disabled actors and themes surrounding disability, again the problem of truth arises. What is the truth of representation? When is it not political? Representation is always fixing and changing meaning within the field of political opposition. For example, Rade Šerbedžija, the “perpetual Eastern European bad guy” (Sulivan n.pag.), is typecast into roles of villains from Eastern Europe which is a place of position (the feeding of stereotypes about Eastern Europeans) as well as counter position (the comical subversion of the role/ Eastern European subject).

What chapters “Depression and Disability” and “Stumped by Genes” present is a careful analysis of whether depression as part of the medical model can be understood as a disability, and a critique of common misconceptions about depression. The chapters also critique contemporary ideas about gene research as a pan-solution, instead of looking at genetics as “a new way of examining old problems” (The End of Normal 76) which could be read through the notion of prosthetics (addition as well as removal).

Chapter Six, “Diagnosis: A Biocultural Critique of Certainty,” creates within its title the impossibility of certainty which is truth’s purview. Biocultures have to deal with their own position on acquiring truth(s). The intersection of different disciplines or perspectives is set up as a fragmentation of some truth(s) which have a universal character. Davis himself is not interested in a pseudo revival of an Enlightenment project (The End of Normal 16), so why is there a qualification of truth presented in the Manifesto? To deal with this, Davis introduces a tool – interpretation – which is used across disciplines and can be a common ground for biocultural approaches because “(i)f we

are all interpreting data, then we are doing more or less the same thing" (The End of Normal 125). This is based on an idea that all (or many) disciplines rely on the same notion of interpretation, that data has the same ontological status, and that there is an agreement about the nature of the "thing". In fact, the only epistemological claim present in the Index is the word uncertainty, uncertainty as part of understanding disability (30). Biocultural approaches are, maybe, here to stay but claims toward truth present in the Biocultural Manifesto have to be reconsidered. Davis' analysis depends on critique which is eclectic (sometimes even too dispersed inside a theoretical framework), and every chapter testifies to ambivalences, uncertainties, and out-of-boundary approaches (The End of Normal 68). Why is there then, such a fixating concept such as truth destroying the possibility of our perspective on understanding?

* The quotation in the title is taken from Canguilhem, Georges. The Knowledge of Life. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008. Print.

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