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Why Is Disability Missing From the Discourse on Diversity?



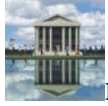
Randy Lyhus for The Chronicle

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By Lennard J. Davis

It has been more than 20 years since the Americans With Disabilities Act took effect, but while the law has changed some things in higher education, it hasn't changed the way academic culture regards people with disabilities. While our current interest in diversity is laudable, colleges rarely think of disability when they tout diversity. College brochures and Web sites depict people of various races and ethnicities, but how often do they include, say, blind people or those with Parkinson's disease? Or a deaf couple talking to each other in a library, or a group of wheelchair users gathered in the quad? When disability does appear, it is generally cloistered on the pages devoted to accommodations and services.

It's not that disability is simply excluded from visual and narrative representations of diversity in college materials; it is rarely even integrated into courses devoted to diversity. Anthologies in all fields now include theoretical perspectives devoted to race, gender, and sometimes social class, but disability is almost never included. Indeed, in my field, literary theory and cultural studies, *The Norton Anthology of Theory & Criticism* had only one essay on disability in its thousands of pages, and that was removed in the second edition. (Full disclosure: I wrote the essay.)



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I recently gave a talk about disability and diversity at a major university, and a scholar of African-American history seemed nonplused that I would consider disability as on a par with the oppression of people of color. Indeed, one famous disability-studies scholar who taught at a historically black college was denied tenure (subsequently reversed) for having made the analogy between race and disability.

I would argue that disability isn't just missing from a diversity consciousness, but that disability is antithetical to diversity as it now stands. It seems clear, as the literary theorist (and my colleague) Walter Benn Michaels points out in his book *The Trouble With Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality* (Metropolitan Books, 2006), that diversity nicely suits neoliberal capitalism. Michaels argues that the idea of diversity functions to conceal financial inequality.

I would add that diversity also represses difference that isn't included under the better-known categories of race, ethnicity, and gender. In other words, diversity can exist only as long as we discount physical, cognitive, and affective impairments. (The Americans With Disabilities Act defines disability as "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities.") These need to be repressed because they are a collective memento mori of human frailty; but more than that, they are narcissistic wounds to the neoliberal belief in the free and autonomous subject. The post-Enlightenment citizen's main characteristic is individuality and the ability to craft one's destiny and choose one's fate. But disability seems a lot less like choice and a whole lot more like fate and powerlessness.

Colleges are not exempt from this way of thinking. Courses on diversity are intended to celebrate and empower underrepresented identities. But disability seems harder for people without disabilities to celebrate and see as empowering. The idea presented by diversity is that any identity is one we all could imagine having, and that all identities are worthy of choosing. But the single identity one cannot (and, given the ethos of celebrating diversity, should not) choose is to be disabled. No one should make the choice that his or her partner be disabled, or that their child be born with a disability. So how could disability legitimately be part of the diversity paradigm, since it speaks so bluntly against the idea of choice and seems so obviously to be about helplessness and

powerlessness? If diversity celebrates empowerment, disability seems to be the poster student for disempowerment.

The rather limited underlying concept behind the idea of diversity in the university is laid out in the philosophy: "We are all different—therefore we are all the same." But if difference is being equated with sameness, then how can being different mean anything? That contradiction is resolved by finding some "other" to repress (an other whose existence is barely acknowledged). That other is disability. What diversity is really saying, if we read between the lines, is, "We are different and yet all the same precisely because there is a deeper difference that we, the diverse, are not."

That peculiar sameness of difference in diversity has as its binary opposite the abject, the abnormal, and the extremely marginal—and that binary opposition gives a problematic meaning to the general concept of diverse sameness.

One of those deeper differences might be thought of as medical difference. Medicine defines a norm of human existence, while diversity superficially seems to reject norms. There is no "normal" human being anymore, as there was in the period of eugenics. Diversity seems to say that there is no race, gender, or ethnicity that defines the norm, as, for example, the white, European male used to. Indeed, that is a tenet of diversity studies.

But in the realm of medicine, the norm still holds powerful sway. No one wants to celebrate abnormality in the medical sense—no one is calling for valuing high blood pressure or low blood sugar. There is no attempt to celebrate birth defects or cancer (although we celebrate those fighting cancer). The word that people most want to hear from the obstetrician is that the child is "normal."

If diversity rejects the idea of a normal ethnicity, it has no problem with the notion of the normal in a medical sense, which means, of course, it has no problem with branding some bodies and minds normal and some abnormal. As long as disability is seen in this medical sense, it will therefore be considered abnormal and outside the healthy, energetic bodies routinely depicted in celebrations of diversity. And let us remember that students of color are referred to as African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and so on, but on the medical side of campus, students with disabilities may often be referred to as ... patients.

For a long time, in disability studies, there has been a cherished belief that if we work long and hard enough in the academic arena, we will end up convincing other identities that disability is a real identity, on a par with the more recognized ones. That position still remains a hope, but I am beginning to think that this opening up of the inner sanctum of diversity to admit the abject may well

never happen—not because scholars or administrators are mean or ignorant, but because diversity as an ideological paradigm and a course of study is structurally related to the goals of neoliberalism.

As such, diversity must never be allowed to undermine the basic tenets of free choice and the screen of empowerment that conceals the lack of choice and the powerlessness of most people. Why should professors and students who want to cherish and celebrate diversity be forced to realize that in so doing, they are excluding from their consciousness the nearly 20 percent of people in the nation who have a disability?

Although higher education has improved in providing accommodations and services to students with disabilities since the Americans With Disability Act, it has lagged very far behind in recognizing and incorporating disability across the curriculum. The question remains: Is this simply neglect, or is there something inherent in the way diversity is considered that makes it impossible to recognize disability as a valid human identity?

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