

An Excellent Start, but Ironically Lacks Diversity

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Review of *Keywords for Disability Studies*, edited by Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin (New York: New York University Press, 2015). 288 pp. ISBN: 9781479839520

Keywords for Disability Studies, a collection of sixty-two short essays, follows the model of Raymond Williams's book *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976) and explores the meanings and histories of, problems with, and the co-construction of fundamental terms in Disability Studies. As the editors state in their introduction, the book

is intended both to highlight debates and differences within disability studies and to provide a conceptual architecture that holds together the field's sometime fractious components . . . to define terms . . . [that] delineate the field's debates and problems, while also establishing their importance to many other areas of inquiry across the disciplines. (3)

And while I am not sure they succeeded in holding together their fractious components, the volume does give an excellent introduction to the history and shape of Disability Studies, while also acknowledging some of the shortcomings of the field.

In keeping with Williams's *Keywords* format, each essay is brief and concise, highlighting a single word, arranged in alphabetical order (excepting the chapter "Disability," authored by the editors, which is put first for obvious reasons). Many have obvious ties to Disability Studies, like "Medicalization," by Sayantani Das-Gupta, or "Ability," by Fiona Kumari Campbell. Others are less obvious, but still very relevant, such as "Aging," by Kathleen Woodward, or "Vulnerability," by Ani B. Satz. While I would like to discuss each chapter in full, the sheer number of them makes that impossible. Some found themselves trying to do too much, as in Petra Kruppers's chapter, "Performance," which tries to both cover performance in the way that Judith Butler uses it with respect to gender, that disability is per-

formed in order to fit in to or to avoid fitting in to social constructions of disability, but also in a fine arts construct that devolves into a list of performance troupes that involve the disabled. This may have been an excellent piece were it a full article, but the space constraints hampered its attempts to bring those disparate definitions of performance together in a coherent whole. Most of the articles, however, were excellent; short, concise, and illuminating.

The largest criticism I have for the volume is the heavy focus on the United States. In a perfect world I would change the title to *Keywords for Disability Studies in the United States*. Only a handful of the sixty-two essays even acknowledged disability studies beyond US borders, most merely acknowledging legislations passed in Western Europe, and only five of the authors currently work outside of the US (in Canada, the UK, Australia, Sweden, and Belgium). One chapter, Susan Burch and Kim E. Nielsen's excellent "History," delves into Ancient Greece and Rome, as well as Russia, Germany, and the Arab-Islamic world's historical conception of disability. Beyond that, the rest of the articles focus almost completely on the United States.

While this focus on US Disability Studies scholarship and activism is not, in and of itself, a bad thing, it is something that should probably have been acknowledged by the editors right off the bat. In failing to do so, they risk marginalizing and silencing disabled (and the activists and scholars thereof) voices from other cultures and locations. This runs counter to the stated goals of Disability Studies so it is, in my opinion, no small issue that this volume fails to acknowledge its own limitation in this way. The editors do situate the volume as working with the concepts as they are known and used in the "early twenty-first century" (2), and it would have been an easy addition to indicate the place as well.

This has ramifications beyond just the lack of a diversity of voices (ironic in a book with a chapter titled "Diversity" that investigates the exclusion of the disabled from diversity discussions), or the comparative understanding of Disability Studies scholarship in other cultures. Many of the chapters assume universal truths, beliefs, and cultural norms that simply do not hold for many places outside the US or Western Europe. For example, in the chapter "Dependency," by Eva Feder Kittay, she writes, "we well might ask why humans, who belong to a thoroughly social species, so despise dependence" (54). This assumes that the entirety of the human race despises dependence, when for much of the world, the dependent nature of people on family, community, and government is central to their individual and social identity. These assumptions are extremely problematic in a field that is based on pushing back against oppressive and hegemonic norms.

Overall, however, I would say that this is an excellent introductory volume on the state of Disability Studies in the US in the early twenty-first century. I would love to see another volume dedicated to Disability Studies in the Global South or East, because I believe that with greater globalization, the issues around disability will inevitably become entangled and intertwined cross-culturally. Disability Studies scholars and activists will need to shift their understanding of individual experience with disability, and the varying social constructions of disability, to accommodate these differing cultural contexts. This volume is an excellent first step, and I hope it leads to broader explorations of disability in a more global context.

Reference

Williams, Raymond. 1976. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New York: Oxford University Press.