As its title suggests, this is a book of essays written in appreciation of the late pioneer of disability studies, Tobin Siebers, who died in January 2015. According to the introduction, the volume's title reflects Siebers's main interests and contributions to the field. The book’s introduction, “Reimagining Disability Studies,” was written by the four editors, who describe themselves as former students of Siebers at the University of Michigan. They write that Siebers was crucial in influencing their thinking on the topic of disability studies and that this was why they wanted their tribute to be more than a traditional Festschrift, which, they argue, usually only appeals to those acquainted with the scholar in question. To this end, while the introduction provides an overview of Siebers’s ideas and the various books in which he developed them, the essays in the book apply these ideas to other situations and specific projects.

According to the introduction, Siebers’s ideas were varied but focused particularly on the areas of sexual and other affiliations, links between structural locations and coalitional politics, and aesthetic representation in the visual arts. The introduction discusses Siebers’s final two books, *Disability Theory* (2008) and *Disability Aesthetics* (2010), both of which have much to say on the topics especially important to Siebers. They were originally intended to be one volume, but Siebers decided that they would work better as two separate books. *Sex, Disability, Aesthetics* is divided into three sections, each dealing with one of the three topics forming the book’s title. Interestingly, the introduction also contains a rather more enlightening description of David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder’s concept of “narrative prosthesis” than originally provided by the authors themselves.[1]

Part 1, “Sex,” contains only one chapter, Alison Weiner Heinemann’s “Witnessing ‘Disability Experience on Trial’: Toward Critique and Emancipation.” Heinemann argues that disabled survivors of sexual assault are routinely denied the acknowledgment they deserve. This failure to acknowledge their suffering has been evident in large-scale movements like #MeToo in 2017, an omission that resulted in the creation, in February 2018, of the hashtag #DisabilityToo. According to Heinemann, the fact that disabled people experience higher levels of sexual assault but are simultaneously left out of movements campaigning against it is an example of what Siebers, in his book *Disability Theory*, called “the ideology of
ability.” Siebers defined this as, “at its simplest, the preference for able-bodiedness. At its most radical, it defines the baseline by which humanness is determined, setting the measure of body and mind that gives or denies human status to individual persons.” Disabled people are left out of these conversations because they are seen as being asexual, which, in accordance with Siebers’s “ideology of ability,” is in some ways tantamount to being seen as not human. Siebers recognized this, writing that the ideology of ability “affects nearly all of our judgments, definitions, and values about human beings, but because it is discriminatory and exclusionary, it creates social locations outside of and critical of its purview, most notably in this case, the perspective of disability” (p. 24). Heinemann’s chapter pays tribute to Siebers’s treatment of this topic, which is found in chapter 6 of his book Disability Theory.

Siebers argued that experience was—and often needed to be—evidentiary. In this, he was in direct opposition to scholars like Joan Scott, who argued that the practice of emphasizing histories of hitherto overlooked people in the past runs the risk of “naturalizing” difference by “taking as self-evident the identities of those whose experiences are being documented”—by being, in other words, more interested in the present than in the past (p. 26). Siebers responded to this by raising the possibility that Scott’s criticisms were not compatible with emancipatory goals and that “disability experience has the potential both to augment social critique and to advance emancipatory political goals” (p. 27). For example, in considering the 2004 case of Tennessee v. Lane, which concerned a disabled plaintiff suing a US state for denying him access to public services, Siebers highlighted the attention the court paid to the 1927 case of Buck v. Bell. Though this earlier case had actually been about forced sterilization, the court thought that it was relevant because “the Court does not set aside sex in its consideration of disability discrimination but asserts the relevance of sexual experience of unequal treatment under the law.” According to Siebers, “there is such a thing as the sex of architecture, and it affects the sexual practices allowed by various spaces and the artifacts in them,” and disability activism thus maintains a focus “that extends from public venues concerned with sexual and reproductive health ... to private spaces where sex manuals, products, devices, and assistance are used to create new sexual environments better suited to people with disabilities” (p. 29).

It is hard to know if this argument is ingenious or merely tenuous—a demand for endless special pleading that does nothing to promote equality but merely entrenches what may be false, irrelevant, or outdated perceptions of inequality. Does Siebers’s attitude to disability discrimination potentially give rise to similar problems to those identified by Scott with regard to the proliferation of interest in the histories of hitherto marginalized people in that it does not matter very much what one’s own experience actually was? It is more a question of whether or not one can point to historical precedents of one’s own group being marginalized or otherwise discriminated against. Nevertheless, Siebers insisted that “we have to remember that marginalized disability experiences happen not in heteroclite and mobile spaces of transgression ... but places with real-world qualities where human beings want to experience pleasure, creativity, knowledge, and recognition—basic needs often ignored and unsupported when it comes to the disability experience” (quoted on pp. 29-30). Siebers argued that “without a theory that can verify how social identities are embodied complexly in lived experience, it is not clear how we can understand what oppression is and how it works” (p. 30).

This tendency to describe any kind of perceived inequality as “oppression” may not be very helpful and may be susceptible to similar criticisms to those that Scott made about the idea that “experience” was always relevant. For example, Heinemann recounts the case of Jane, a young woman with Down syndrome who had been the vic-
tim of a series of serious sexual assaults, apparently committed by the same individual. The conviction was effectively overturned two years later when the man convicted of assaulting Jane was granted a new trial and the jury’s verdict was reversed. The judge who took this decision was, in fact, the same one who had originally sentenced the man to twenty-five years in prison. Having apparently reconsidered the matter, he decided that the conviction did not fulfill “principles of justice and equity” (p. 30). Jane did not behave like a victim, and the man convicted of assaulting her did not behave like a perpetrator. Heinemann argues that the case exemplified problems that people with learning difficulties often encounter when attempting to secure justice. For example, two legal researchers point out that compliance may often be mistaken for consent and that disabled women may be particularly vulnerable to being seen simultaneously as childlike and asexual, as well as predatory and oversexed. The problem is that it is simply impossible to tell from Heinemann’s description whether these problems were instrumental in Jane’s case, and, if they were, how much bearing they had on the judge’s decision to reconsider the case. Certainly, seen from a British point of view, a judge should not be swayed by simplistic ideas, like that there is only one way to “seem like” a victim. This is the kind of behavior that tabloid newspapers indulge in, and two recent cases come to mind. In 2001, the British tourist, Peter Falconio, was murdered in the Northern Territory of Australia and a section of the British tabloid press was convinced that Falconio’s girlfriend, Joanne Lees, was guilty of the crime owing to her seeming—to them—to be insufficiently upset. In fact, Lees was completely innocent and Bradley Murdoch was convicted in 2005 of Falconio’s murder. A similar case of “trial by tabloid” involved Christopher Jefferies who, in 2010, was arrested on suspicion of the murder of Joanna Yeates, a tenant of his. Although Jefferies was similarly innocent, the tabloids considered him “weird,” which was enough for them to find him guilty and for him to suffer the consequences of such irresponsible behavior by widely read publications. I mention these two cases because, although they did not occur in the United States, they may have a bearing on Jane’s case. They suggest that the judge in the case of Jane was not fit to be a judge and that the case might not have revolved so entirely around preconceptions about disability as Heinemann suggests. Preconceptions about disability may have been part of the problem rather than the whole problem. On the other hand, preconceptions about disability tend to be backed up by science and thus are widely regarded as facts, even when they are no such thing. The problem is that Heinemann raises these preconceptions but does not show how—or indeed whether—they operated in the case of Jane. Though there seems little doubt that her case was very badly handled, the chapter does not shed much light on the extent to which Jane’s disability played a part in this.

Part 2 of the book deals with identity. Cynthia Wu opens chapter 2, “It Depends: Academic Labor and the Materiality of the Body,” by observing that, when he was ill with cancer, Siebers often chose not to take the pain medication he had been prescribed in order to remain sufficiently alert to write. This leads Wu to question whether the belief that one should always be working, even when terminally ill, is not a flaw in the culture of the professoriate. Should someone like Siebers not be the very last person to support structures of which he has been so critical? She concludes, however, that “for Tobin, the delicate balancing of mind and body may have been rooted not in self-policing but in ... a sense of purpose or even pleasure.” Thus, Wu’s chapter is devoted to, in her words, “cripping the genre of the academic essay” (p. 41). It does this in three ways: “by bending traditional notions of linearity, by using autoethnographic ingredients in its analysis of academic cultures and by making transparent the work involved in writing” (pp. 41-42).
The title of Wu's chapter, “It Depends,” is taken from Eva Feder Kittay's assertion that human beings are all interdependent and that this interdependence should be recognized and valued. Wu argues that “independence is an illusion.” She also argues that “disability is an identity which depends on its context.” Though one might say that this is the case for most identities, Wu points out that disability as an identity is dependent on, for example, the extent to which one encounters hostile environments and that not encountering “enough” of them may lead to a feeling that one is “not disabled enough” (p. 43). A cynic might view this as needing to encounter discrimination so that one can have an identity.

This idea that a disabled person needs to exist in opposition to society is also evident in Wu's claim that she is distressed by her love of writing “because it reproduces normative values in the academy” (p. 45). This comment suggests that there is something inherently wrong with “normative values,” and that is a pity, because the perception that she is complaining about everything diminishes both the power and the validity of her argument. What Wu actually wants to criticize is the way that the necessity of engaging in endless nonacademic work leaves her little time or energy for writing. While teaching and talking to students can prove very thought provoking, academia requires her to do so many other things that both are unrelated to the life of the mind and prevent her from engaging in it fully. I have heard similar criticisms from colleagues at English universities. Wu also observes that staff from ethnic minorities are “disproportionately” affected by “having to shoulder heavy diversity workloads” without systemic change, although Wu does not offer any insights into what such change might look like (p. 46).

Basing her work on Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber's book, The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy (2017), Wu advocates that universities ought to place more value on ideas than on productivity. She observes that disabled academics can still find themselves at a disadvantage and gives the example of Ellen Samuels, who coined the phrase “crip time.” Wu does not define this term but gives a suggestion of what it might mean by showing how Samuels entered academia because she assumed that it would be more flexible than an ordinary 9-5 job, and thus more accommodating of her need to do things at a gentler pace due to her impairment. In addition, writes Wu, Samuels's condition makes her look younger than she is, resulting in her working herself into the ground while still not being taken seriously—in Samuels's words, “being perceived as a perpetual graduate student” (p. 48).

It is easy to see some truth in Wu's argument that, in an institution in which ideas, rather than the characteristics of the person who has them, are paramount, Samuels's youthful appearance would conceivably not be seen as a reason to discount her ideas.

On the other hand, Wu does seem somewhat inflexible, at one point relating how she responded to a friend's offer that she try riding her new mobility scooter by giving the friend a lecture on how this would supposedly be inappropriate—as though the friend could not make such a decision about her own scooter without the benefit of Wu's superior knowledge. Their disagreement was rooted in differing interpretations of what the mobility scooter meant, with her friend, the late writer Ellis Avery, insisting that “my scooter is not my identity” and linking Wu's decision to lecture her to an unpleasant experience she had had when an usher at a theater had insisted on addressing her as “Wheelchair” (pp. 49-50). By contrast, Wu cautions against the desire to “refrain from playing with the accoutrements of disabled people as though they were toys,” because, she points out, unlike someone reliant on, say, the availability of lifts when using public transport, “it does not cross my mind to notice if an elevator at a given transit stop is out of service, because I always take the stairs or escalator” (p. 50). This is a
rigid interpretation of what disability supposedly means, and in fact Wu states that, in her view, the definition hinges on whether one needs workplace adaptations. What appears to me to be the problem is Wu’s perception that, as someone who is not really disabled, she has “the freedom and obligation to draw attention to disability-related issues that impact others.” It is somewhat dismaying that Wu seems to think that there is only one “real” disability identity and that, as she does not have it, her role is to smooth the path for people who do. This is not the case. There are lots of disability identities and all of them, including Wu’s, are completely legitimate. Earlier in her chapter, Wu relates how she started experiencing symptoms of her autoimmune condition decades before she was diagnosed and how eventually being diagnosed made her feel vindicated: she even states that she had proof of her symptoms’ existence. Simply reading this statement makes me feel angry on Wu’s behalf, as well as quite convinced that, in struggling for so long to get a diagnosis, she had been subjected to prolonged gaslighting—a form of emotional abuse where the victim’s reality is repeatedly denied with the result that they begin to doubt their own sanity. Even medical professionals who treated Wu sympathetically had essentially been telling her that her symptoms did not exist, because they could not see them. After this prolonged experience, anyone would feel somewhat illegitimate, even if in possession of an unusually strong character. It strikes me that this is Wu’s authentic experience—and that it is not an uncommon one. Wu says that she has a “chronic illness,” but I wonder if she might find it more helpful to describe it as a hidden disability (p. 52). It affects her, and the fact that it cannot be seen does not mean that it is not there. Having said that, Wu paints an unedifying picture of US society as having an intense and unhelpful preoccupation with categorizing people: at one point, she relates how she spoke to students at Siebers’s memorial and states that they were from “multiple racial categories” (p. 51). For some reason, Wu appears quite unable to see them simply as students who, for a variety of reasons, struggled to fit in at an elite university. Despite writing that she was not a fan of identity-based mentoring because it lets majorized faculty off the hook in learning how to teach and advise all students, treating all students equally is unlikely to happen when an apparent preoccupation with the students’ racial background dominates everything and must be made relevant even when it is not. This is not going to result in a cohesive society but rather in never-ending competition and a preoccupation with things that do not matter. I also wonder if, when race is persistently problematized, it might end up being a self-fulfilling prophecy in that the students Wu spoke to ended up viewing their race as a difficulty, not because it was but because they were persistently told that it was. Similarly, Wu’s decision to lecture her friend about how she should see her own mobility scooter might have been appropriate if the friend had been offering rides to all and sundry, but, as far as we know, this was not the case. In addition, the theater usher’s decision to refer to Avery as “Wheelchair” was a disability issue insofar as the usher might not have addressed a nondisabled person, or someone from another minority group, in a similarly dismissive way. Alternatively, Avery might have been “encouraged” not to regard the matter with as much seriousness as would be the case if something equivalent had happened to, say, a person from an ethnic minority. But in another sense the usher’s behavior was simply rude, irrespective of who it was directed at.

Chapter 3 is Jennifer Marchisotto’s “Cracks Filled with Images: Mental Disability, Trauma, and Crip Rhetoric in Cereus Blooms at Night.” Like the previous chapter, it mentions the concept of “crip time” and extends it into “crip rhetoric,” a theory developed by Marchisotto. She describes it as a theory in which “language and narrative are fundamentally reshaped to accommodate histories of trauma and mental disability” (p. 58). This relates to Siebers because, in his book Disability Aesthet-
ics, he called for an increased consideration of trauma in relation to disability and claimed that it would enhance the aesthetic representation of disability by incorporating “wounds” and that trauma studies could contribute most usefully to disability studies by enlarging the concept of mental disability to include the psychic impairments, psychological injuries, and mental traumas provoked by modern life. Specifically, Marchisotto’s chapter focuses on Shani Mootoo’s 1996 novel, *Cereus Blooms at Night*, to argue that “through non-linear structure, and a reliance on the affective, or felt but inarticulate transmission of knowledge, Mootoo’s novel challenges the assumed authority of articulate language as the most precise, and therefore superior, method of communication” (p. 59). The novel tells the story of Mala Ramchandin, an elderly Caribbean woman, and, because of Ramchandin’s loss of the ability to use language, this life story has had to be pieced together by Tyler, Ramchandin’s nurse at the almshouse where she has come to live. This flexibility toward not having a linear narrative structure is known as “crip time,” the term coined by Samuels, as explained in the previous chapter.

Ramchandin has been effectively nonverbal for decades, ever since she, as a child, killed her abusive father after he had subjected her to a particularly violent attack. This being so, Marchisotto situates the novel within both disability studies and Siebers’s work on trauma studies. Although Marchisotto observes that trauma studies and disability studies are usually opposites of one another—the former focusing on loss and the latter on future possibilities—she shows how Siebers focused on how trauma affects the present and the future, “how it perpetually determines its own representation through crip rhetoric and other aesthetic forms” (p. 66). One example given by Marchisotto is that of the Chilean/Argentinian writer Ariel Dorfman’s play *Death and the Maiden* (1990) in which a woman named Paulina, who was previously tortured during a conflict in an unnamed Latin American country, feels sure that she recognizes the voice of the man who tortured her in a visitor, Roberto. Paulina never saw her torturer’s face and the play never confirms that Roberto actually was the torturer. Nevertheless, argues Marchisotto, “understanding the event of trauma while still presenting the original event as in some ways unattainable provides a starting point for moving forward despite uncertainty.... Those questions [the ones brought up by the play] are orientated towards a futurity.... The traumatic event is no longer an event of the past never to be understood, but an event that can be rearticulated into the future, albeit neither straightforwardly nor predictably” (p. 67). This is interesting but also troubling. The play never makes clear whether Roberto is guilty, and the interpretation given to it in Marchisotto’s chapter is that this does not matter. What is important is that Paulina’s “encounter” with him gives her an opportunity for personal growth. I would argue that Roberto’s guilt or innocence very much does matter: he is either a perpetrator who belatedly receives a taste of his own medicine or a sacrificial lamb who risks ending up just as traumatized as Paulina. It is interesting to think about this in terms of Ramchandin’s father versus Roberto: by attacking someone smaller and weaker than him, someone toward whom he had a duty of care and should have loved and protected, Ramchandin’s father was unquestionably a perpetrator. He was attacked not by someone who considered him guilty but by someone who knew he was guilty, who was trying to protect herself from him and who had quite possibly had enough. But Roberto? If he had been attacked by someone who had decided that he was guilty, but his crime (if committed by him) happened in the past, his and Paulina’s interaction is understandable in terms of the aftereffects of trauma, but this interpretation still relies on trauma being an event located in the past. Marchisotto’s apparent disregard of Roberto’s guilt or innocence remains deeply troubling, on a par with the demand that someone’s “truth” should be re-
spected, regardless of whether it contains any actual truth.

The fourth chapter of this section is Therí A. Pickens’s “Ghosts of Disability in Naomi Shihab Nye’s Transfer.” This is an exploration of a 2011 collection of Arab American poetry about the writer’s father, Aziz Shihab, a displaced Palestinian who died of cardiac and renal failure. Pickens describes “ghosts of disability” as “those that lived with disability such that their memories or their legacies would be incomplete without incorporating the complexity of disability into their narrative” (p. 77). Shihab Nye’s collection was inspired partly by the titles within her father’s notebooks, which were then used to create new poems. These poems were organized thematically. Its five sections deal with such matters as death rituals facilitating mourning, the author’s grief both for her father and for Palestine, and a poem about writing with ash. Pickens claims that she regards the collection as “a space where disability becomes a site of resistance because cultural agency has been suppressed. Aziz’s social location as a disabled, displaced Palestinian reverberates with political exigency after he dies.” Shihab’s disability (Pickens seems remarkably confident that his health problems constituted a disability) is no longer a thing that just happened but essentially a useful framework for thinking about his enforced exile from his homeland: “disability and its afterlife—how disability circulates as transnational, raced, and interdependent despite a lack of corporeality—animates how to address the deep difficulty of Palestinian displacement” (p. 82). Pickens continues: “In the case of Aziz Shihab, his disability ... appears to be an individualized concern in a Western nation. Yet his disability remains historically contextualized as acquired under the conditions of living as a displaced Palestinian” (p. 83). It is difficult to see why an appreciation of Shihab’s personal history is supposedly incompatible with an acknowledgment of his individual pathology.

Pickens makes it clear that one important purpose of Shihab Nye’s poetry collection is to open a dialogue with her father on subjects it seems he was unwilling to discuss with her. This is one reason why she cannot portray exactly what he thought, but this becomes one of the strengths of the collection, as “her prose jumps—takes intuitive leaps—between her body and mind and his” (p. 85). Dialysis is reimagined as a metaphor for this interaction—just as the dialysis machine is useful for filtering blood but does not always work perfectly, so Aziz refused to discuss certain topics, such as Palestinian displacement—in “ways that allow exchange” (p. 86). Thus, his daughter is obliged to imagine what he might have thought.

Chapter 5 of part 2 is Thomas Abrams’s “Crawling Upstairs: Identity and Ideology in Tobin Siebers’s Disability Theory.” Abrams writes that his aims in the chapter are threefold: to explore Disability Theory’s formulation of identity; to suggest that Siebers’s use of ideology does not suggest a theory of ideology; and to redress the poor deal which he feels that such theorists as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Donna Haraway have received in Siebers’s work, partly due to their inclusion as post-structuralists. Abrams argues that this is a dismissive and insufficient way to treat them and that their ideas have much more in common with Siebers’s own than he seemed to recognize.

In relation to his first aim, Abrams observes that the meaning society attributes to disability, expressed in, for example, the importance it places on things like rehabilitation, versus its lack of attention to access, means that Siebers’s identity politics remains important and that his “ideology of ability” is real. According to Siebers, both Foucault and Butler contributed to this problem, by “only seeing identity as a site of subject formation, at the whim of disciplinary institutions” (p. 100). Siebers similarly complained that both Butler’s work on bodies and Haraway’s work on cyborgs ignore disability. Foucault, wrote Siebers, saw disability only as a problem—something he accused
post-structuralists in general of. Abrams is not quite so convinced of this, arguing that Siebers's "ideology of ability" is much more similar to theirs and specifically that a wider reading of Foucault's work (i.e., one that is not limited to his best-known work, Discipline and Punish [1975], which Abrams accuses Siebers of treating as "emblematic of Foucault's work") would help to make this clear (p. 106). For example, Abrams suggests that paying attention to such texts as Foucault's The Birth of the Clinic (1963) would make Siebers's attitude to him more nuanced. He gives the example of the changing conditions through which disease was known and acted on in the eighteenth century, pre and post the French Revolution. Nevertheless, Abrams accepts that the "ideology of ability" is "as real as it gets" and that Siebers's call for a collective disability identity as a way of combatting this remains a powerful tool (p. 108).

In opening part 3, the following chapter, Rebecca Sanchez's "Words and Images: Networks of Relationality in Deaf, Blind, and DeafBlind Aesthetics," continues the theme of strength through collective identity. Specifically, Sanchez takes what she describes as Siebers's "most frequently quoted" passage from Disability Theory: "The disabled body changes the processes of representation itself. Blind hands envision the faces of old acquaintances. Deaf eyes listen to public television. Tongues touch-type letters home to Mom and Dad. Feet wash the breakfast dishes. Mouths sign autographs. Different bodies require and create new modes of representation" (pp. 113-14). Siebers's peculiar phraseology aside, such as "blind hands" (hands are not blind, they belong to blind people) and "deaf eyes," Sanchez's chapter focuses on how Deaf, Blind, and DeafBlind people and their requirements have, in Siebers's words, "changed the processes of representation" (p. 113). She argues, for example, that sign language is far more than just another language; it is a means of communicating ideas that stretches into other art forms. Sanchez gives the example of the Flying Words Project, which, she says, "defines poetics as a series of images in motion: a beating heart that morphs into the American Sign Language (ASL) sign 'poetry,' a bullet that travels around the world, a forest full of trees and bushes. At one point in the text, the poetic signer paints a portrait, portraying both the artist and the image on the canvas as it emerges from the brush strokes" (p. 114). This painting is then destroyed by its creator and is shown resisting its fate, something that Sanchez describes as "surprisingly touching," because once an object is seen as animate (and sentient), the audience becomes able to identify with it. Something similar happens in the British Sign Language (BSL) poet Paul Scott's work "Two Books," a poem in which books come alive and, by revealing their contents in BSL, attempt to convince a potential customer at a bookshop to purchase them. Scott claims that "for deaf people, I am the book," which Sanchez describes as meaning that "through a language inseparable from his body, Scott translates the written contents of the book into linguistic images." Sanchez argues that the effect of this is "an expanded sense of self," which is also central to John Lee Clark's DeafBlind literary practices (p. 115). Clark says of one performance in which he took part that "we break our story into eight parts because there are eight of us to tell it tonight" (p. 116). The audience was similarly divided into eight clusters. In recent years, the number of such productions has increased, and Sanchez writes that perhaps the most controversial aspect of developments in sign language interpretation has been the change to the "machine model," in which interpreters should give their clients all the information in the original text but add nothing. The purpose of this is to avoid the previous practice of making paternalistic assumptions about clients' levels of knowledge, and in fact the American Federation of the Blind stipulates that interpreters should not augment their interpretation with such things as personal opinions or comment. Georgina Kleege is among those who has criticized this studied neutrality, and she has argued that this comes from the idea...
that what sighted viewers see varies very little from person to person. Kleege writes that “I have to quibble with the notion that absolute objectivity is possible or even desirable,” meaning that such description can often become a shared intellectual endeavor (p. 118).

A problem that Sanchez does not appear to perceive comes from descriptions that she describes as neutral but that are clearly not. For example, she gives Park McArthur and Tina Zavitsanos’s description of the famous, but anonymous, painting *The Family of Henry VIII* (ca. 1545) and claims that “there is no explicit pushback against the principle of providing a ‘neutral’ account” (pp. 118-19). Sanchez suggests that various details identified by McArthur and Zavitsanos, for example, the names of the court “fools” or the direction in which the figures are facing, might not be present in another description, and this is true, but what concerns me is the final sentence of the description in which we are told that “all figures appear to present as white and are dressed in the binary gendered clothing specific to their role in the court” (p. 118). The phrases “appear to present as white” and “are dressed in the binary gendered clothing” immediately problematize the subjects’ race and gender and suggest that in a historically white country, the expectation that Henry VIII and his family would not be white is somehow legitimate. (I’m not trying to suggest that there were no black people in Tudor England; most countries have minority groups. But acknowledging this is not the same as making the confused and ignorant claim that a person who is obviously not “the norm” somehow is). Similarly, the attention the description draws to the “binary gendered clothing” of the subjects invites the viewer to regard their presenting as either male or female as a problem rather than as a simple acknowledgment that most people do fit into these preexisting gender categories. Despite Sanchez’s claims, this description is anything but neutral. In the way it both reflects and contributes to the “culture wars,” it is extremely problematic.

In chapter 7, “Musical Modernism and Its Disability Aesthetics,” Joseph N. Straus considers Siebers’s claim that “the modern in art manifests itself as disability,” in relation to modernist music. Straus argues that modernist music “claims disability by making it a central concern and drawing on it as a valuable source of new kinds of musical combinations and musical effects” (p. 125). This often operates in defiance of traditional ideas that disability is an unwanted identity, and such has particularly been the case during the era of eugenics. Modernist music is representative of five disability conditions: deformation/disfigurement, paralysis/mobility impairment, madness, idiocy, and autism. Deformity/disfigurement is traditionally understood as, for example, an outward sign of inner evil, but Straus argues that modernist music has turned this on its head and that “its fractured forms and fragmented textures [are] a sign of liberation from conventional restrictions,” and, as a result, it “claims deformity and disfigurement as a valuable and aesthetically desirable resource” (p. 129). Straus makes similar claims for the other categories of disability that he identifies, writing, for example, that “in modernist music, idiocy is represented by an extreme simplification of melody, harmony, rhythm, and texture” (p. 133). He names Erik Satie, Stravinsky, and Virgil Thomson as examples of this, and I can imagine the first two at least being surprised to discover that they had written musical endorsements of idiocy. Straus writes that “the Nazis waged war against modern art because they interpreted the modern in art as disability” and that critics of modernist music, particularly on the political right, have described it as disabled: sick, diseased, and mad (p. 136). Straus implies that the Nazi euthanasia program happened because of a recognition of the centrality of disability to modernism, which might be considered to be allied to Siebers’s own claim in *Disability Aesthetics* that the most important thing about so-called Degenerate Art was that “it
inspires horror and disgust in us all.”[2] Although this is an interesting argument, one of the principal justifications for the Nazi euthanasia program is that the victims supposedly failed a cost-benefit analysis. These ideas may have been linked, but they did not target the same people.

Chapter 8 is “Staging the Asylum: Javier Téllez’s Disability Aesthetics” in which Leon J. Hilton discusses the Venezuelan artist and filmmaker Javier Téllez’s 1996 installation, La extracción de la piedra de la locura (The extraction of the stone of madness), which was created for a museum in Caracas. Hilton tells us that the installation “borrows its name from the Spanish title of the fifteenth-century painting by Hieronymus Bosch, known in English as The Cure of Folly” (p. 141). It occupied several galleries in the museum where it was exhibited and it depicted several rooms of the Barbula psychiatric hospital in Valencia. Téllez’s parents worked as psychiatrists at this hospital, which was considered one of the most innovative in Latin America. Téllez’s installation, in Hilton’s words, seeks to “substitute the spectator’s gaze for that of the medical expert” (p. 142). This echoes Siebers’s own ideas, for in his book Disability Aesthetics he wrote that aesthetics “tracks the sensations that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies” (p. 143). Téllez initially resisted the application of the term “disability aesthetics” to his own work, although Hilton does not say why. The psychiatric hospital that was the subject of Téllez’s installation was founded in 1951 and was very much shaped by left-wing resistance to European fascism. This was instrumental to the hospital’s progressive outlook, although the installation also includes a machine that administered electric shock therapy.

After the installation, Téllez collaborated with psychiatric patients on such films as You Are Here (2010), although it is unclear if he was ensuring that the patients’ voices were heard or simply exploiting them for his own ends. Unsurprisingly, he was convinced that it was the former, quoting Paul Klee’s comment that “art ... makes things visible” (p. 158). Hilton argues that both Téllez and Siebers “imagine new modes of relation between looking and perceiving, knowing and speaking, watching and acting” (p. 159).

The final chapter is Amanda Cachia’s “Disability Aesthetics: A Pedagogy for Teaching a Revisionist Art History.” While all of the chapters show that Siebers’s theories have wider applicability than “just” the situations to which he applied them, Cachia argues that art history as a whole needs to change in response to them. According to Cachia, “conventional art history has not accounted for the reality of disabled subjects and their bodies, or rather, where misshapen forms have not been discussed in a disability-positive manner” (p. 161). She goes on: “in the classes I took, both in my native country of Australia and in San Diego ... art historians continued to teach that the ostensible ‘normative’ body is an aesthetic ideal going back to ... the Greeks, the Romans, and the Egyptians.” She acknowledges that this is quite true but argues that it is incomplete. She puts this down to art historians’ ignorance of disability theory and the application of the ideas behind the theory to pedagogy. One example that she gives is the claim that the stylized way the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten was portrayed led him to be described by other art historians as “ugly and misshapen,” and it was even claimed that Akhenaten’s apparent physical appearance mirrored the disordered state that Egypt was in at the time. Cachia argues that this demonstrates the problem: “this theory suggests that disability embodies not only aesthetic characteristics in which perfection can compare and oppose itself on a scale of beauty versus ugliness, but it also acts as a symbol for negativity in general” (p. 162). She then goes on to explain how she combats this kind of thinking in her own teaching. In essence, she pretends that all her students are disabled, audio-describing PowerPoint slides whether it is required or not. She also gets her students to visit modern art galleries and write essays in which they think about
the artworks they see there. For example, two of her students manage to conclude that blind people are oppressed chiefly by the inability of sighted people to imagine things from their point of view. This takes us back to art historians’ assumptions about representations of Akhenaten. Do the writer’s justifiable criticisms of this mean that she is right to suggest that the problem can be solved so simplistically? I would argue that she is not. The problem seems to me that conventional art historians believe that their opinions about Akhenaten are so self-evidently objective that there is no point investigating them. We know from the historian Herodotus that ancient Egyptian society's ideas about women were unusually enlightened. In addition, we know about Seneb, an ancient Egyptian government official of restricted growth. Although Seneb lived roughly one thousand years before Akhenaten, he is a good starting point. How did he get to occupy such an important position? How representative is he of ancient Egyptian disabled people at different times? I do not know the answer to these questions, but asking them would be transformative in that it would demonstrate that their importance is recognized.

While this is a wide-ranging and thought-provoking collection, it is bedeviled by many of the problems common to the “culture wars.” For example, Cachia’s chapter on Akhenaten appears reliant on the assumption that no one who came before has ever been capable of having an idea, and thus that Cachia alone (e.g., without the help of Herodotus or Seneb) has had to argue against the idea of other art historians that perceptions of disability and its meaning are so self-evident as to require no discussion. Similarly, Sanchez’s report of the description of the painting The Family of Henry VIII is truly insidious; it problematizes everything and suggests that there is no such thing as truth. Being engaged in a valiant struggle, not against injustice but against reality, makes you perceive Donald Trump refusing to concede an election. The “culture wars” mean that these things are scrutinized much more closely than they might otherwise be.

Notes

[1]. The editors of Sex, Identity, Aesthetics define “narrative prosthesis” on the situation in which disabled characters are “foils for shoring up nondisabled protagonists and advancers of plot without being afforded multidimensionality themselves” (p. 2). This is more user-friendly than the original from Mitchell and Snyder’s 2000 book, which states that “disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potency, and analytical insight” (David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000], 224).

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