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*Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar
Body (review)*

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Book Reviews

Michael Davidson, *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008. ISBN 978-0-472-05033-8 pbk 304pp \$24.95

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The ground-breaking *Corporealities* series has become essential reading for scholars of disability and culture, and this latest volume lives up to the high standard set by its predecessors. Michael Davidson's *Concerto for the Left Hand* is an exceptionally wide-ranging collection of essays on disability, culture, and aesthetics. The key concerns of the volume are illustrated by the two striking images Davidson uses to open the text: the cover photograph of the Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein, who lost an arm in World War I, and the description of a community swimming pool. For Davidson, the pool is a place where a wide range of people, with diverse bodies, come together; a place where "No one is disabled. Everyone is disabled" (xiii). The pool indicates Davidson's commitment to issues of social justice, while acknowledging the variation inherent in 'disability.' The depiction of Wittgenstein (and the volume's title) signals the interplay of disability and aesthetics which is at the heart of the book. Davidson offers detailed discussions of disability arts, and of disability representation within cultural forms, but also moves beyond these to consider what a disability perspective offers to conversations about aesthetics more generally. His discussion of the repertoire of music for one-handed pianists, for example, explores how such works might "resituate both music and disabled performer" (xvi). This book, then, will be useful to scholars at all points on the spectrum of approaches to disability and culture.

The first chapter considers changing discourses around haemophilia during and after the 1980s AIDS pandemic, placing this in the context of ideas about the 'bleeder' through history. In chapter 2, Davidson explores the links between disabled and queer bodies in film noir. Deaf poetry is the subject of the next two chapters, which examine the role of sound and speech in Deaf (and deaf) performance and ASL poetry respectively. Chapter 5 continues the focus on poetry with a discussion of the work of Larry Eigner. Davidson explores how consideration of a poet's corporeality (Eigner had cerebral palsy) can offer alternative perspectives on his or her work. Chapter 6 analyses the work of blind

photographers and film-makers, while chapter 7 considers disability globally, focusing on film. The final chapter also takes a global perspective, examining the international trade in body parts, and its representation in a variety of literary and filmic texts. These two chapters will be particularly useful for scholars seeking to move beyond the primarily western focus of much humanities-based work on disability.

This type of brief summary inevitably slights the text described, but this is particularly so for *Concerto for the Left Hand*. For example, chapter 6, one of the shorter chapters, opens with a brief discussion of Joyce's *Ulysses* and modernist ocularcentrism. Davidson then considers attempts to rethink the museum in relation to blindness, discusses performance art reflecting upon sight and ocularcentrism, and examines two films, Derek Jarman's film *Blue* and Jocelyn Moorehouse's *Proof*. He then offers an in-depth discussion of the work of Slovenian photographer Evgen Bavcar, before finally returning to Jarman's work. Other chapters have a similar or greater breadth of reference, bringing together a diverse range of topics and cultural forms. This might have resulted in a book that was disjointed, or one that, in attempting to speak to many audiences, pleases none. However, Davidson's consistency of approach and ability to develop productive connections means that these pitfalls are avoided, though there is a tendency to leap between topics and texts, particularly in the later chapters. This is a book that demands close attention and, in some parts, multiple re-readings, but offers significant rewards to the attentive reader.

Who, then, is this book for? Despite a pleasingly clear and engaging writing style and largely jargon-free prose, this is not a book suitable for undergraduates, though certain excerpts—such as Davidson's discussion of the Theresa Schiavo case or his reading of *Million Dollar Baby*—could be used as adjuncts to class discussion. Those teaching in the area of disability and culture will find much here to stimulate the imagination, as will scholars of disability and disability aesthetics. Taken as a whole, the book is an exemplary illustration of the possibilities opened up by a cultural approach to disability—and a disability-influenced approach to culture. In fact, the only slight reservation I have in recommending this volume is that several chapters, or sections of them, have already appeared (albeit sometimes in different forms) in works researchers in this area are already likely to own: the second edition of Lennard J. Davis's *The Disability Studies Reader*, Sharon L. Snyder *et al.*'s *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, and the PMLA special section on 'Disability Studies and the University', amongst others. Even so, this volume will be a valuable addition to the library of any scholar working on disability and culture, inspiring the reader to make productive connections across time periods, disciplines, nations, and cultural forms.