

**nancy viva davis halifax. (2023). *act normal*. Montreal, QC: McGill-Queens University Press. ISBNs: 978-0-2280-1871-1 (paper), 978-0-2280-1947-3 (ePDF), 978-0-2280-1948-0 (ePUB)**

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*act normal*<sup>1</sup> is a collection of poetry addressing the dehumanizing treatment experienced by the residents, deemed to have what we would now call intellectual disabilities, at the Huronia institution of Orillia, Ontario, Canada. It also speaks more generally for the many who have suffered at the hands of the various institutions empowered to govern the types of differences coded as disabilities. The perpetrators of this abuse, including not only the staff and management, but also the state with its entire eugenic apparatus, were most often positioned to be able to do this work free of moral scrutiny, critique, or outrage. Early in the collection, davis halifax quotes a damning report about the widespread neglect and abuse of residents in Huronia by Canadian journalist Pierre Berton in 1960. In address to the public at the time of writing, Berton declares “you have been told” (p. 15). In their poems and references, davis halifax makes it clear that these abuses continued, largely unchecked, for decades after his report. Thankfully, contemporary scholars and documentarians, many of whom the author cites as sources in this collection, have begun to create a record of these abuses and to chronicle the resilience of the survivors of these institutions. However, academic and other traditional means of address can only go so far in evoking the true harm of the eugenic practices, because they cannot help but

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<sup>1</sup> I have tried to reproduce the author’s exact capitalization grammatical, and spacing choices in quotations as precisely as possible.

bear relation to the formal languages of oppression (Lorde 1984<sup>2</sup>). Through their use of found items such as archival materials, court cases, legislation, transcripts, and case histories, visuals, and techniques of redacting, typing-over or superimposing text upon text, davis halifax gives voice to the silenced and enacts a reversal that often renders the institutional discourses unintelligible and speaks poignantly to the experiences of the residents.

The author, a critical disability scholar who identifies as “queer and crip” (p. 4), explains in their own words that the intent of this form is “‘to crip writin’ [so as] to practice a movement counter to the hegemony of normative arts practices”, further asserting that “crip writin’ ” does not fret about incoherence / incredibility / or a lack of reason” (p. 4). Two artefacts they incorporate for poetic reflection in this enterprise are the 1927 Buck vs. Bell U.S. Supreme court case involving the forced sterilization of people deemed to have intellectual disabilities [though the exact label is redacted in the poem] and the Alberta Sterilization Act of the same purpose. These and other documentations from this world become found poetry, with the author’s redactions, insertions, and typeovers finding, by way of implied judgement, the moral incoherence behind these texts’ presumption of speaking for objective science — or in the best interests of anyone. The poem “1927” (p. 8), for example, appears to take the text related to the Buck vs. Bell sterilization case and superimpose it, mirror-image, upon itself, rendering much of it, save for complimentary empty spaces, almost impossible to decipher. Some of the few spaces of typographical clarity include “due process at law” and “three generations of imbeciles are enough” with the illegibility of other the text emphasizing the capriciousness of these claims. davis halifax’s “UNSPEAKABLE : WORDS” takes unintelligibility even further, consisting only of the letters ‘a’ through ‘s,’ with each seeming to categorize an image of what appeared to

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<sup>2</sup> ““The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (Lorde 1984, p. 110).

me to be audio volume indicators, presumably of speech acts. I found myself reflecting on clinical language and its Foucauldian (2003) tendency to privilege and silence, with any content beyond the sound waves rendered unavailable. In both cases, any straightforward attempt to read the poems conventionally is thwarted and the reader is left to consider what this experience of reading itself might have to say about the abuse and erasure of so many at Huronia and other institutes. It is fitting that the found poem about the eventual performance of governmental accountability for Huronia, entitled “APOLOGY (UNDER ERASURE)” (p. 55) is just that — another found text functioning partially, but not entirely, as blackout poetry. Most of the apology is written faintly enough as to be difficult to see, with only jarring words like “pain, abuse, neglect, and unbearable” boldly printed, in an apt visual illustration of the inadequacy of any contrite statements.

Some of the found phrases used as poem titles, always written in uppercase, suggest the poems will be about clinical topics, but this is sometimes deceptive as the poems below are not clinical, but are rather speculative vignettes incorporating the perspectives of the residents. The uppercase titles imply a cruel authority over the lowercase, and sometimes faint, text about their lived experiences. “ASYLUM” (p. 19), for example, describes a young resident’s first day at such an institution, the bucolic setting outside the institution seemingly promising “summer camp bonfires [and] marshmallows [and] swimming” before the stark realization of their imprisonment on the “wrong side of this place” where the only vague reminder of the serenity outside is the “light dandelion yellow” of the institutional laundry they will be tasked to sort. In “CONSENT TO INVESTIGATION TREATMENT OR OPERATIVE PROCEDURE” (p. 73), portrays the horrifying behavioural training of very young residents. Initially they insist “the child’s not a metaphor” but, towards the end, seemingly invite us to reflect on their earlier

statement and question the efficacy of familiar literary devices in capturing this troubling scene. They achieve this effect inviting a comparison between the children housed in this institution and an abandoned, naked doll, before concluding with another literary device often used to symbolize sorrow “the clouds chant.”

Always inventive (the generative nature of the writing is well-captured in their use of the term “wordflowers” on page 29), davis halifax nevertheless chooses to write less experimentally at times, relying on directness instead of techniques of confusion to evoke hard truths about these eugenic institutions. In one such poem, they allow the juxtaposition to work for itself as they write of the toxic positivity of staff, telling the child residents “don’t forget to shine / as they lines you up / for boiled dinner” (p.72). More starkly yet, “THE CONSTITUTION OF SUBJECTS” (p. 23) addresses how, as a resident, “you are constituted & regulated as a threat / included as a cost in preventive medical services” and the “wretched stink of prevention” that characterizes the eugenic system. Most directly of all, the journalist Berton’s aforementioned words form the only text of the poem entitled “DO NOT SAY THAT YOU DID NOT KNOW 1960” (p. 15) while another in the collection vividly addressing the magnitude of the abuse is entitled “THE GOVERNMENT KNEW : THEY DID NOTHING.“ In “35 MILLION \$” (p. 20), about the eventual settlement with Huronia survivors, davis halifax references how Berton described the younger residents as “tiny tots / with clouded minds,” before ironically likening the settlement and the suffering it compensated to “a whale beached / nothing spectacular.”

The titular poem of the collection “ACT NORMAL : A CHARM” (p. 25) suggests a portrayal of the author themselves, humbly describing a catalogue of insecurities, both their imposter syndrome and the larger challenge of making something of lasting worth and meaning from the limited sources available. Despite these limitations, they hope to be able to “slip in” this

work, suggesting a mode of stealth may still be necessary for this author, this topic, and this type of scholarship, in order to reach acceptance. Perhaps this stealth is possible. davis halifax is indeed a magician in their dazzling use of concealing and revealing. But it may prove challenging to “slip in” for this work, to contribute only quietly to art and scholarship about Huronia, eugenics, and the ongoing erasure of people with disabilities. It is one of the most challenging and compelling works I’ve read about these topics and I would recommend it for researchers in Disability Studies, connoisseurs of poetry, social science scholars interested in non-traditional forms of scholarship, and anyone interested in the power of art to amplify call for social justice. Gadamer notes

The occasionality of human speech is not a casual imperfection of its expressive power; it is, rather, the logical expression of the living virtuality of speech that brings a totality of meaning into play, without being able to express it totally. (2004, p. 454)

davis halifax uses the limits of language to create a statement that is profound well beyond its individual words. Despite their reservations, through their play with erasure and unintelligibility, and in their outrage, sorrow, and solidarity, davis halifax’s collection “evokes lives lost”, “contests normative claims”, and is “resonant with possibility” (p5).

### References

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