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Brown, Nicole, and Jennifer Leigh, editors. *Ableism in Academia: Theorising Experiences of Disabilities and Chronic Illnesses in Higher Education*. UCL Press, 2020. ISBN: 9781787354975

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Ableism in Academia: Theorising Experiences of Disabilities and Chronic Illnesses in Higher Education is a collection of essays and exploratory academic writing. Edited by Dr. Nicole Brown and Dr. Jennifer Leigh, the collection identifies and challenges ableism in the context of higher education, largely in the United Kingdom. The book is the planned result of a conference, Ableism in Academia, held in March 2018 at University College London.

The collection consciously aims to cut across academic disciplines and does not consider itself a work of disability studies. Yet the different disciplinary perspectives of the authors – including sociology, philosophy, and disability studies – as well as the personal and poetic approaches included, do unite effectively. The contributions build on each other to demonstrate the depth of prejudice against disability built into universities, and the unrealistic academic expectations of workers in academe. The book is insightful, and often personal.

A particular strength of the collection is the clarity with which *Ableism in Academia* examines the requirement for hyper-productivity amongst academics. The need for constant and ever-increasing productivity is understood to be especially damaging for disabled academics, but harms non-disabled people as well. Many of the scholars' contributions identify and critique the damage done by demanding or impossible levels of productivity. In her compelling submission,

“Autoimmune Actions in the Ableist Academy,” Alice Andrews takes this insight a step further. She goes beyond identifying and critiquing the damage done by the demands of productivity to argue that academia’s unyielding insistence on the rational and the well is itself pathological. Andrews draws on philosopher Jacques Derrida to argue that ableist attempts to exorcise disability and illness within academic systems is an autoimmune disorder, analogous to her own. The University writ large attempts to rid itself of elements which do not fit into an impossibly narrow understanding of the rational, productive, and healthy. Andrews writes:

The intention is to suggest that the academy’s attempts at self-defence are autoimmune – particularly with regard to its attempts to eradicate illness, disability and difference – and that this autoimmunity might force an opening to ways of working together that could move beyond a logic of survival. (104).

Andrews does understand ableism to contribute to negative experience of illness and disability in academia, magnifying or even creating the negative aspects of disability and illness. Yet she is wary of the social model of disability's distinction between impairment and disability. She values the social model's role in disability activism but finds it dismissive of the physical lived realities of illness.

In “The Violence of Technicism: Ableism as Humiliation and Degrading Treatment,” Fiona Kumari Campbell clarifies the book’s strongest overall theme: the harm of ableism. She presents the reader with a thorough, intellectually rigorous examination of the academy’s assumption that “able is best.” Campbell is interested in drawing to the surface and examining the subtle and unacknowledged violence of ableism, particularly when it takes the form of humiliation or gaslighting, or both.

Yet the book goes beyond identifying the realities of ableism in academic life and cataloguing its toll on disabled academics. *Ableism in Academia* presents solutions to the harms of ableism and identifies strengths that disabled academics bring to positions of leadership. Nicola Martin, in “A Practical Response to Ableism in Leadership in UK Higher Education,” notes the dishearteningly low proportion of disabled academics in leadership positions, but points out the advantages disabled academics bring to these roles. She uses empirical evidence to argue that disabled people are often effective in positions of leadership because they have developed valuable skills as a result of navigating “myriad socially constructed everyday difficulties” (76). The emphasis on the advantages disabled scholars bring to their work, especially to positions of leadership, is refreshing and clearly expressed, as is Martin’s emphasis on the need for practical solutions to problems of ableism in the academy.

Although the collection’s themes and individual entries are engaging and well written, where *Ableism in Academia* does break down slightly is in its organization. Having the lengthy “list of contributors” section early in the work felt like a speed bump on the way to the book’s engaging individual works. Additionally, the thirteen pieces do not always flow one from the other. The collection might have benefited from division into sections focusing on shared themes or styles. As the book is presented, the shift between pieces can be jarring, especially transitions between highly academic writing and more personal or poetic entries.

Lastly, the editors’ introduction is, in my view, somewhat weak. It does set up the book’s unique cross-disciplinary nature, but there is a problem of both too much and too little information. The conference that gave rise to the book is over-explained; details like the conference’s social media presence seem out of place, yet the introduction also assumes a level of

familiarity with the particularities of the United Kingdom context that not all readers will possess.

Throughout the book, *Ableism in Academia*'s contributors challenge the romanticized vision of academic life as peaceful and reflective. The book highlights the untenable demand for hyper-productivity placed on many academics. More importantly, it acknowledges and describes the theoretical and practical harms of ableism. *Ableism in Academia* is a valuable contribution to the literature for anyone looking to understand how ableism is experienced in academic settings, and the systems that allow it to exist and persist.