Book Review

Title: *In the Shadow of Disability: Reconnecting History, Identity and Politics*

Author: Pieter Verstraete

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Reviewer: Steven E. Brown, Ph.D.

Verstraete's book, based on his doctoral dissertation in Educational Sciences, is a deliberately provocative look at disability issues from new perspectives. The origins of this analysis began when Verstraete, now a postdoctoral research fellow at the Flemish Fund for Scientific Research Flanders/KU (Catholic University) Leuven, in Belgium, was asked to do research in educational initiatives for individuals with disabilities.

In the course of this research, he came across a photograph of two people riding (or posed on) a tandem bicycle in the early 1900s. The mystery of the photo, for Verstraete, is that a young adult deaf-blind lady sits in the front, or lead, position of the bicycle. How does she control the bicycle? This question led to an investigation of disability that focuses on shadows, identity, Michel Foucault, solitude, and politics. Much of this review is in Verstraete's words, to share the flavor of the writing. For example, in a paragraph about shadows and Foucault, Verstraete writes:

> "We all lived and live in the shadows of and were and still are not capable to escape from the innumerable, dynamic and complex strategies that separated man from an undefined light source. For Foucault it was simply impossible to get rid of power relations and one therefore had to cope with the idea that man was continually asked to behave in this way or another way" (p. 66).

Much of the book reflects the theme of the above quote, which is how people are influenced by and react to power. Verstraete shows there are other ways, than are currently standardized, of looking at disability. In the concluding and summative chapter he writes:

> "Up till now historians of disability have been urged to look out for those places where persons with disabilities are silenced in order to reveal their voice…. I am convinced that if one does not want to get trapped into the lure of visibility…one also has to invite historians of disability to look for those silent places where new forms of life can express themselves" (p. 120).

From silence and shadows, Verstraete focuses on presenting analyses of disability in unusual ways and this applies to activity; he notes, "persons with disabilities are just like able-

bodied persons confronted with a power-knowledge nexus that wants all of us to become active citizens, one that does not distinguish anymore between those who are and those who are not disabled" (p. 121).

He concludes that for him disability history could be an imaginative search for, "new ways of behaving, other forms of life and new ways of speaking" (p. 122). In other words, disability and disability history open opportunities to look at the world in new ways, if only we take advantage of those opportunities.

There are aspects of *In the Shadow of Disability* that disability studies practitioners are likely to find frustrating, such as the notion that activity or productivity is not for everyone, which is hardly a new idea in disability rights circles; and others that are likely to be inspiring such as looking within shadows and silences for spaces hitherto unexplored.

The book would have benefitted from better proofreading to catch a number of typos and an inconsistency when nineteenth and twentieth centuries are sometimes used interchangeably. But these are minor quibbles for an interesting and stimulating book that may benefit graduate students and researchers of disability studies, but is unlikely to find a place with undergraduates or outside the field of disability studies.

Steven E. Brown, Ph.D. recently retired as Professor of Disability Studies and *Review of Disability Studies* Media Reviews Editor at the Center on Disability Studies, University of Hawaii. He can be contacted at sebrown@hawaii.edu.