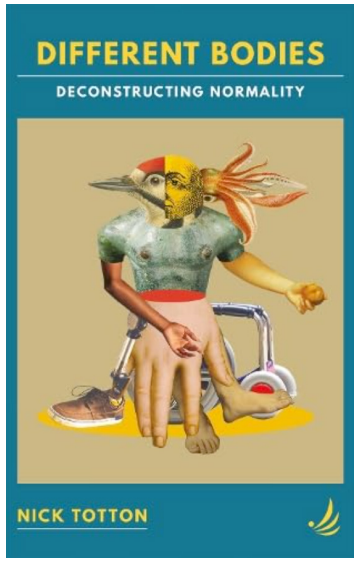
BOOK REVIEW

Different Bodies

Deconstructing Normality

by Nick Totton

Roz Carroll



ABSTRACT

A review of Nick Totton's *Different Bodies* which summarizes and reflects on the contents of a ground-breaking and substantial book. It considers his in-depth arguments on the insidious nature of 'normative' values and his extensive research into other perspectives that are more enriching.

Keywords: Difference, Normative Embodiment

Nick Walker, author of *Neuroqueer Heresies* (2021), deftly describes *Different Bodies* as "a radical and beautiful emancipatory work [that] dismantles the concept of 'normal people'".[i]

The author, Nick Totton, is a prominent figure in the field of UK Body Psychotherapy. His early work, *Reichian Growthwork* (1988), co-written with Em Edmonson, is still in print, and his fascinating study of Reich's psychoanalytic roots, *The Water in the Glass: Body*

and mind in psychoanalysis (1998), was how I first discovered his work. He has written or co-written ten other books, including *Psychotherapy and Politics* (2000), *Wild Therapy* (2011), and *Embodied Relating* (2015), and edited five more, including *New Dimensions in Body Psychotherapy* (2005) and *Vital Signs: Psychological Responses to Ecological Crisis* (2012), with Mary-Jane Rust. The core themes of his work can be summarized as challenging the establishment, deepening the concept of embodiment and undomesticating therapy.

It's impossible to really summarize this book: the scope is wide and the argument quite intricate – not in the sense of being overly complicated, but rather like a Celtic knot, as befits the theme of densely interconnected issues. It is as much philological and existential as social-political, and always with a foundation in the perception, meaning, and process of embodiment in the world and in therapy.

A core strand is a relentless challenge to any discourse invested in the "them and us" strategy of making one group "normal," even by implication, and excluding others for being different. He deconstructs, as have others (Barker & Iantaffi, 2019; Carroll & Ryan, 2020; Sycamore, 2006), the very idea of "normal." Totton explains in his Introduction:

> *This book is for people, or the parts of people, who define themselves as 'normal'. The aim is to help you relinquish that label, both in relation to yourself – despite the privilege it gives you – and in general, as a supposedly helpful way of grasping the world. Like many labels, 'normal' brings into being its opposite, 'abnormal'. This happens very frequently and visibly between groups of people, but I will be arguing that it also happens within people – that very many of us have a 'normal' position within ourselves that despises, shames and persecutes other 'abnormal' parts of us* (p. 1).

Totton grasps early on the nettle of his own privilege and blindspots, as well as the "shamingly late realization about my own field of work, body psychotherapy." Throughout, he quotes widely from those on the front line of lived experience of marginalization, and from the fresh and vigorous activists and theorists articulating new and thought-provoking positions. In fact, one of the joys of this book is that, while confronting and testifying to the pain caused by the domination of a normative view, he brings into the foreground the voices of a dynamic, articulate, colorful, rebellious, and celebratory countermovement. One of these voices is Tobin Siebers, who coined the term "'temporarily able-bodied," or TAB (Siebers, 2008, p. 71), to point out that anyone can become disabled at any time. Totton uses this term by extension to refer to the "temporarily normal" (p. 5).

And so, he continues

> *My aim, in fact, is to speak to, and as a member of, the temporarily normal – the constantly shifting group of people whose bodies and bodily capacities fall, at a particular moment and in particular relevant dimensions, within the accepted category of 'normal' – and try to persuade my fellow members that we are the problem.*
>
> *We are the problem in the same crucial sense that white people are the problem in relation to skin colour, and men are the problem in relation to gender* (p. 6).

With this, the first stream in a finely wrought argument begins to flow as part of a deep enquiry into the structures that uphold pathologizing, categorization and oppression. It is profoundly searching (and researched) in its quest to unearth or unravel the linguistic, political, and behavioral strategies that construct our complex modern world. Many questions are posed throughout the book, and no easy answers offered – rather a journey with many provocations, byways, fascinating arguments, and perspectives.

Totton is sensitive to the issue of who is given a voice, and strives not to speak *for* marginalized communities, but *through* their words, citing the disability activists' slogan, "Nothing about us without us." He pays close attention to language throughout – playfully, subversively, and poetically – because "to explore new territory, one needs new language, and new language is always provisional, inconvenient, alienating, rendering both ourselves and our surroundings strange and unfamiliar – stressing us sufficiently that we see less of what we expect and more of what is actually to be seen" (p. 13). He also explains his choice of terminologies such as mainly using "skin color" and "colorism" in preference to "race" and "racism", because "race" is a construct, created by colonialism, with no grounds in biology (Quijano 2000).

The book is divided into four main sections: Making a Difference, Other-wise, Becoming Plural, and Becoming Animal. Perhaps the latter heading comes as a surprise in a book that explores race, gender, sexuality, disability, and neurodivergence. But as we shall see, it is both the logical underpinning and endpoint of a richly nuanced argument about difference, power, inequality, and the absurdity of trying to understand the world through divisions, hierarchies, and attempts at fixed order.

Making a difference

In Chapter One, Totton tackles the concept – implicit and explicit – of the *generic* body. He cites the work of British feminist journalist Caroline Criado-Perez, whose book *Invisible Bodies* exposes the data bias that reveals how practically everything is designed for men.

Conventionally "Reference Man" is Caucasian, age 25-35, able-bodied, and weighs 70Kg. It is immediately obvious that he references only a small minority of human beings, yet is the default figure for enormous bodies of data: for example, of toxicity, transport, tools, and protective gear (p. 22).

And Body Psychotherapy, he points out, has its own problem with Reference Man. Normativism has infused body psychotherapy literature, where until very, very recently – I'll cite more progressive works later – explicit attention to and exploration of difference (gender, sexuality, race, age, neurodivergence) have been lacking. And in particular, in teaching illustrations and exercises, there has been an unquestioned *assumption* of able-bodiedness in client and therapist.

In Chapter Two, Totton looks at difference, privilege, and power mainly through the lens of disability and disability activism. Drawing on the rich reservoir of "Crip theory," he outlines the insidious ways that "ablebodiedness, claiming to be the natural and normal state, in fact *creates and imposes* disability" (p. 33).

Totton strongly asserts "the need for body psychotherapy *associations and institutions*, as representatives of a profession that works directly with the painful and sometimes shattering effects of [what] Caldwell has called somaticism to take public action by [...] campaigning actively against all its forms" (p. 26).[ii] The most recent issue of *IJBP* on social justice in somatics is an inspiring example of this. The article titles speak of engagement, passion, and political aliveness: "Black girls are taught to survive," "An anti-oppressive quest to hold a body," "Disappearing act," "Neo-functionalism applied to the lived experience of a transgender person during gender affirmation," "Fanon's vision of embodied racism,", and many more. As guest editor, Karen Roller entreats us, "may this be the only time social justice is a 'special issue' for the *IBPJ*. [...] we must collectively awaken from our shared macrodissociation that interrupts our connections with each other and our planet. Breath by breath, we do this through microconnections to ourselves, each other, and the Earth" (Roller 2023, p. 14).

I think that the challenge to face intrinsic assumptions of ablebodiedness is particularly stark and poignant because many somatic pioneers – Feldenkrais, F.M. Alexander, Elsa Gindler – developed their approach as a way of dealing with their own chronic illness and serious injury. Or, like Emilie Conrad, evolved rich and subtle ways of working with the body, such as focusing on the fluid system, to support movement exploration in those with severe spinal cord injury (Conrad 2005). These important figures were not psychotherapists, but they did influence the development of embodied psychotherapies. Likewise, Arnold Beisser, the psychiatrist who fell ill with polio at 24 and was paralyzed for the rest of his life, made a significant impact (1989). As a wheelchair user, he trained in and practiced Gestalt therapy, and wrote the influential essay "The paradoxical theory of change" (1970). Another pioneer was Veronica Sherborne, who trained and worked with Rudolf Laban. For over 50 years, she worked with children with special needs, and their parents, carers, and teachers, developing the foundations of a creative relational movement approach (Sherborne, 2001).

These somatic pioneers dedicated their lives to the development of somatic work with bodies of all kinds, sharply questioning medical models of treatment. Yet critical disability theory offers the potential to take the field of Body Psychotherapy further and to properly update the foundations of our thinking by requiring that we rethink the whole way we perceive, locate, and frame relationships between those with disabilities and the society, including psychotherapists, they inhabit. This rethinking is at the heart of *Different Bodies*, and runs through all the chapters. Some of this important work has already evolved in the practice of dance movement psychotherapists working with children and adults with a wide range of disabilities (Unkovich, Butte, & Butler, 2017; Woods, 2019, Frizzell, 2023).

In the final chapter of this section, "Every body is different (differently)," Totton follows the earlier streams of his argument into the thematic river of intersectionality. He considers the huge area of layered and interrelated oppressions, including the way that "plaited into the concept of race, facilitating its use as an instrument of domination, was the identification of 'non-white' with 'disabled'" (p. 46).

Other-wise

In part two, Totton explores what he calls different 'other-wisdoms' – autism, ADHD, dyslexia, Down syndrome, and other neurodivergences, as well as Elaine Aron's concept of the highly sensitive person and Bernstein's 'borderland' personality. In a wide-ranging argument that is both subversive and subtle, he suggests that normativity has done great harm, not only in making people feel less than, but also in dampening and denying the particular gifts and capacities, and especially sensitivities, that neurodivergence covers.

Throughout the book, Totton considers the social processes underlying the biases implicit in any attempt to define what is normal. He draws on the work of Gramsci, who used the phrase cultural hegemony to describe the ability of groups in power to impose on society as a whole a worldview that comes to seem like common sense, while actually serving the interests of a particular group. Autistic people, Totton argues, challenge the normative hegemony in parallel ways to other communities of difference, demanding that the temporarily normal recognize the privilege that they would rather keep invisible (p. 98). He discusses the issue of autism diagnosis, citing C. L. Lynch, who fully demolishes the autistic spectrum concept, insisting that "a spectrum is a *line*, but autistic people form a *field*, in which each person can have a different set of skills and difficulties" (2019, p. 104).

What I like about this book is that serious – and sometimes playful – discussion leads to provocations that reverse the dominant paradigm, with questions such as: "What would it be like to take the vertiginous leap into fully embracing neurodiversity and treat *all* information processing styles as essentially differences rather than deficits?" (p. 120).

Becoming plural

This section is an exploration of gender and sexuality, of variation and liberation, of taboos and charged topics, and of people: "Breaking out of the straitjacket of binary gender – and not only by reversing gender, or even by *refusing* gender and/or sexuality entirely, but by finding wholly new, finely inflected gender identities …" (p. 134). As in other parts of the book, Totton likes to track and engage with the detail in the debate – the conflict between trans people and gender critical feminists, intersex biology, trans and autism, and the "battle of the bathrooms." This segues into the next chapter, "No-one is just one," and the fluidity that characterizes both gender and sexual practice, concluding with a "clarified, queerer and cripper version" of Reich's contribution to an embodied, pleasure-full sexuality (p. 174).

Becoming animal

In this final section, Totton articulates the deepest ground of his argument: the "final frontier is the one between the human species and the rest of life on Earth […] therefore, I am going to draw with gratitude from indigenous cultures and refer, as many of them do, to other-than-human *people*" (pp. 192, 194). He spells it out: "Other-than-human people are in a sense another, vast community of embodied difference, alongside disabled people, neurodivergent people, Black, indigenous and people of colour, and LGBTQI+ people. The issue is not that we shouldn't treat other humans as animals – animals is what we are – but that we shouldn't treat *anyone*, human or otherwise, as 'animals', in the sense that 'animal' is coded as 'someone who doesn't deserve to be cared for" (p. 205). The parallels between human abuse (including the consumption) of non-human animals, and the abuse, control, or murder of any groups of people designated as "animals" is striking.

Yet there are also juicier, regenerative, expansive, and freeing connections to be made if we humans can embrace our evolutionary heritage as animals (and, before that, fish, reptiles, unicellular organisms…). Verbal language, while enabling the development and communication of ideas, also limits our perceptions. The constraints of normalizing arise through language that categorizes, and therefore makes divisions and abstractions, which can be subject to distortion and manipulation. Yet "[e]mbodiment as we directly experience it, filtered only minimally by language and expectation, has a vast and richly multifarious quality that is in a strong sense *impersonal*: an It rather than an I, but also *plural* rather than singular" (p. 212). Here, with this word "plural," is one of those felicitous knots that join up different strands of argument in a core theme.

Totton reminds us that an approach that tracks shifts in embodied relating, that can be playful, that is always open to collaborative negotiation, and that gives space to the wild is both vital and vitalizing. The book concludes by advocating a community of care that is mutual and collective, including all humans, animals, rocks, plants, air, water – that "exist only in a web of living co-vulnerabilities" (De la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 145).

Part Four of *Different Bodies* is a tour de force, weaving ideas from anthropology, biology, disability theory, eco-activism, ethology, feminism, philosophy, physics, post-colonial thinking, comparative race studies, and literature. This sounds daunting, but

Totton does have a gift for taking academic discussion and making it accessible. What comes across is his passion to illuminate and express the possibilities of new interdisciplinary perceptions and reframings, taking us forward in a quantum leap of consciousness. These ideas are mind-bending: stretching and reorganizing the coordinates of the working assumptions of Western linear, materialist thought. I found myself excited and hopeful about the potential for a more expansive sense of kinship, and multiple new relational possibilities, in a world that – if we can co-create, re-create, and radically revise it – is more fluid, flexible, freer, fairer.

This is a very differently structured and focused book to those anthologies that, like Don Hanlon Johnson's *Diverse Bodies*, or Caldwell and Leighton's *Oppression and The Body*, offer chapters where each author explores and articulates a particular intersectional perspective. There is minimal case material as such; the multiple voices quoted are largely activist/theorists. The sections on "Implications for Therapy" are broad-brush, inviting rigorous self-excavation of our assumptions as therapist, and encouraging curiosity and non-defensiveness. For more concretely illustrated and step-by-step therapeutic journeys of working with difference, the works of Rae Johnson (whom Totton recognizes as a pathbreaking voice in Body Psychotherapy, along with Caldwell and Leighton) and Resmaa Menakem's *My Grandmother's Hands*, are recent highly valued contributions.

By growing down into contact through heart and gut, finding roots, interconnecting, and growing up into rigorous self-reflection and openness to further and further education, Totton's book invites us all to be humbled, challenged and inspired.

Roz Carroll *is a registered body psychotherapist (UKCP). She taught in the MA in Integrative Psychotherapy at the Minster Centre for 14 years, at The Bowlby Centre for seven years, and has been a regular speaker at Confer for 20 years. She is co-editor with Jane Ryan of* What is normal? Psychotherapists Explore the Question *(2020) London: Confer. She was a founding editor of the* Journal of Dance Movement and Body in Psychotherapy. *Her numerous writings include chapters in* Embodied Approaches to Supervision, *(Eds.) C. Butte & T. Colbert (2022), and* Talking Bodies, *(Ed.), K. White (2014).*

Email: rozcarroll.thinkbody@gmail.com

ENDNOTES

i. Endorsement, front inside cover of *Different Bodies*.
ii. Defined as making "particular bodies wrong" (Caldwell 2018, p. 36).

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