

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Tanya Titchkosky, *Reading and Writing Disability Differently: The Textured Life of Embodiment*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007, xiv + 250 p., index.

Most people assume that the term “disability” is used consistently and fairly. However, Tanya Titchkosky reveals in her book *Reading and Writing Disability: The Textured Life of Embodiment* that the term is, in fact, used inconsistently by the public and she raises awareness of its problematic conceptual meanings.

The author relies on critical social theory as a framework to analyze and advocate awareness of those oppressed when “disability” is viewed negatively. The book is strategically divided into two distinct parts. Part one (the larger portion of the text) is appropriately termed “Problems,” showing how disability is constituted as problematic in contemporary society. Part two is titled “Dis-solutions” and focuses on the discursive practices which aim to provide for the inclusion of disabled people.

In the beginning of this book, the author cites information about hurricane Katrina from *The New York Times* and CNN as a background to discussing contemporary social structures. “Black people were described as looting; white people, as securing provisions” (3). In the same situation, those who were disabled were “... depicted as stuck outside of the big sports dome or stuck inside some attic awaiting transfer to a habitable environment” (4). As a group, those who had a disability were marginalized, “as the ‘special needs’ people, the ‘elderly,’ the ‘infirm,’ and the ‘weak,’ or simply as the ‘vulnerable’” (4). The author extends the depiction of the marginalization of disability experienced during the aftermath of hurricane Katrina (one isolated event) to other everyday situations not confined to one geographic area. The examples come from common Canadian media sources which include *The Globe and Mail*, *Maclean’s*, *The National Post*, and *The Toronto Star*. The examples illustrate how disability is situated in contemporary society using diverse political, economic, and cultural contexts. If one example does not challenge readers’ assumptions, another will.

Throughout the text (but particularly in part one), the stories are interspersed with information from Canadian governmental surveys, including the Canadian Census, the Aboriginal People’s Survey, the Health and Activity Limitation Survey, the Participation and Activity Limitation

Survey, and the Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics. The author utilizes these surveys to highlight the government's methodology in assessing disability as a "countable thing" and generalizations that are made about this population via labels. The author notes that "it is, of course, impossible not to label people" (195). The presentation and discussion of the statistics inevitably makes disability appear as problematic; however, not all may agree with this. There have been so many methodological changes between the aforementioned surveys that they cannot be compared historically. The surveys demonstrate that as the definition of disability has been modified in the past, those who are and who are not included in the definition can be (and will likely be) changed in the future.

A notable strength of this book is that the author incorporates into her discussions well known writers from various disciplines, such as Hannah Arendt, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Dorothy Smith. The inclusion of diverse theorists "provoke us to consider the act, power, and products of interpretation" (20). As Titchkosky pushes readers to examine their own beliefs, she provides ample background about herself, noting the various appearances of disability in her own personal life. In some sense, the author explains her contextual position more than necessary (although her life may be more infused with disability than others). But the key to the book is that if an author wants readers to examine their awareness of disability, she must lead by example.

In the second part of the book, "Dis-solutions," the author suggests the inclusion of disability, seeing the person rather than the disability, and the value of disability. The well-crafted afterward concludes with the author suggesting that "disability cannot be finished off. Its ambiguity of meaning has been opened and relied on, so as to approach even the most totally clear-cut textual representations of disability as containing the potential to be otherwise" (211). The action-oriented theoretical approach of critical social theory encourages readers to question how they have come to read and write "disability," challenging the initial operationalized assumptions surrounding the term.

This is a well written book, and Titchkosky demonstrates her expertise in the area of disability, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative information. Through the use of easy-to-understand examples, it provides relevance for contemporary everyday life. Due to the multidisciplinary nature of the text, the book is suitable for (but not limited to) undergraduate-level or graduate-level courses in sociology, philosophy, women's studies, medicine, nursing, social policy, and political science. The book encourages readers to think about common terms beyond disability, such as "normal" and "vulnerability."

Before beginning to read this book, it is a good idea to outline your understanding of disability and the context in which you have come to use the term "disability." After reading the text, it will not be surprising if you come to realize that you have not properly considered your assumptions.

Titchkosky succeeds in encouraging readers to investigate our everyday expressions of embodiment and allows readers to “enlarge our understanding of our understandings” (19).

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