

BOOK REVIEW

Title: *Reading & Writing Disability Differently: The Textured Life of Embodiment*

Author: Tanya Titchkosky

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Reviewer: Elizabeth DePoy

Titchkosky has written an important book that examines and showcases “disability meaning making.” Although she focuses her analysis on text, Titchkosky introduces the concept of enunciation early in her book, suggesting that what one learns from her analysis of delimited textual sources may be relevant to a broader domain of representations, utterances, and images that are part and parcel of our social universes.

In her introduction, Titchkosky reveals that as a means to posit views of disability that depart from the tragic deficit gaze; she aims to destabilize these narratives. What can be gleaned from a meticulous textual analysis are the lexical intersections, paradoxical representations, texts, and images that depict diverse meanings of embodiment, difference, and thus disability.

Before meandering through and deciphering meaning of printed texts, Titchkosky first takes the reader by the proverbial hand in Chapter 1 and introduces her major concepts. Although she claims that definitions are one form of text and further asserts she is not adding yet one more definition of disability to our lexicon, Titchkosky offers up what sounds like, looks like, and thus is taken by this reader as a definition of disability. However, different than the less esoteric model approaches to defining disability, Titchkosky locates it in process. That is, she asserts that disability is a “process of meaning-making” (p. 12). She then claims that understanding disability as process helps to illuminate the value scaffolding of embodiment in general, as it implies meaning, value, and devaluation of diverse bodies. Her discussion of bodies, while not new to post-modern literature, nonetheless sets the boundaries for her subsequent analyses of axiology buried in texts. She delimits these sources primarily to those that approach bodies as subject and object, that speak of humans as “having bodies and being bodies” (p. 13) and that locate bodies in a socially choreographed movement of enactment or interaction. According to Titchkosky, regardless of narratives to the contrary, the only essential element that can be shared among the inhabitants of the disability club is that they are rendered, defined, and imbued with identity and meaning by text. To add dimension and complexity to her analysis, Titchkosky reminds us that texturing does not merely articulate a meaning in a document or image, but rather creates a tapestry of difference woven from the daily lives of individuals who interact with social, print and image sources of text.

Equipped with the central concepts that organize her analysis, Titchkosky then bifurcates the remainder of the book. Part One, containing three chapters, focuses on analyses of meaning of disability in diverse text sources. Part Two moves from definition to analysis of response to disability.

As the basis for her claim that disability is inscribed as a problem and thus devalued in comparison to “not-disability”, Titchkosky provides a cogent analysis of varied Canadian

government texts (disability definitions, epidemiological data, census data and so forth). This thorough section provides the reader with the logic sequence that brings Titchkosky's to her own understanding of community with text functioning as the integrative agent. Of particular interest to me was her discussion of survey items. In typical methodological lexicon, survey items are purported to emerge from conceptual definitions extracted from theory. Yet, Titchkosky turns this sequence on its ear, clearly illustrating how survey content creates and reifies constructs. Throughout this compelling chapter, Titchkosky masterfully inserts criticism of the institutionalization of text meanings, and then indirectly points to alternatives without professing "what should be".

Chapters 3 and 4 concentrate analytic energy on a single piece of text, revealing the nuanced way that horribled medical meaning is constructed from the womb throughout life. In Chapter 3, Titchkosky further foregrounds the economic narrative that diminishes the value of disability constructed as medicalized alterity. In Chapter 4 Titchkosky posits "disability-as-negation" logic and its consequences for diverse individuals, larger groups, and for ideology (e.g. human welfare).

Parallel to Part One, Part Two begins with an analysis of Canadian government texts that guide responses to disability. Titchkosky's introduction to this section reveals a sophisticated examination that moves beyond bemoaning disability as exclusion of people with medicalized embodied conditions. Rather, she suggests that the text of bureaucracy, inclusion and overcoming are important to investigate in order to rewrite, rethink and redo meaning. This assertion is then elucidated in the two subsequent chapters in this section. Of particular note is her discussion of the temporal sequence of alterity in which she demonstrates the operationalization of the points that she made about nomothetic survey methodology in previous chapters. Titchkosky skillfully analyzes text to reveal how segregation proceeds by reifying disability through survey and census counting.

Building on the previous chapter, Chapter 5 analyzes how embodiment is apprehended and sculpted by government texts. Moreover, in this analysis, Titchkosky illuminates how text on disability definition and management also creates and institutionalizes the meaning of non-disabled bodies and their control.

In Chapter 6, through unpacking texts that propose solutions to the disability "problem," Titchkosky discusses the overcoming narrative, its value contexts, and its "rise above" implications. As she notes, the overcoming narrative implies the condition to be overcome is heinous and invokes the advanced capitalist ideal of the rugged individual who achieves despite all odds. In these texts, body and self are separate creating the space in which atypical bodies can be ignored in favor of socially desired accomplishments.

Titchkosky does not neatly conclude her work with a summary and recommendations for change, as she asserts that the activity of unpacking and interrogating textualized disability in itself moves towards reframing meaning.

I learned much from my reading of this text and suspect that anyone else who would take the time to navigate the text would be simulated as well. Of course, I did find some claims that defied logic and might be revisited by Titchkosky in subsequent writings. For example, she

claims that literacy is normative. First, literacy itself has multiple meanings particularly in a global, linguistically complex context in which electronic text is ubiquitous and unstable in its form.

Second, while she acknowledges that her own book is a text, she exempts herself from the “God Trick,” or the assertion of ultimate authority she ascribes to others. In doing so, she overlooks her own claims as grand narrative and would be better off challenging the reader and herself to turn her analytic strategies on the textured meaning she has created. Further, by not inviting interpretation of her own work, Titchkosky generates a hierarchy, perhaps unintentionally, of desired ways of knowing through her own preferences of hermeneutics and phenomenology. Moreover, she gives short shrift to the breadth of content in disability studies, as the field is fragmented with multiple perspectives that could provide more potent fodder for analysis.

Finally, implicit and sometimes explicit throughout the book is the equivalence between disability and impairment which I attributed to the absence of language for alternatives. Titchkosky may have decreased this conceptual morass by finding language that would serve her aim of destabilizing this notion. Asserting her embodied diagnosis of dyslexia seems to be a poor fit in a book that proposed reading and writing differently.

The criticisms here are offered as challenges for Titchkosky’s next works. Her book has made a significant contribution to the literature not only on disability, but on the broader discourse of diversity, difference, and change.

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