Titchkosky, Tanya. (2011). The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning.
Toronto: University of Toronto Press. ISBN: 9781442610002.

Reviewed by Mark Castrodale
PhD Candidate, Western University
mcastrod@uwo.ca

In The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning Tanya Titchkosky offers a thoughtful discussion of disability related issues informed conceptually by the field of disability studies. This book is relevant for diverse audiences, scholars, policy makers, students, and anyone interested in examining socio-spatial constitutions of disabled subjects and issues of access. Importantly, Titchkosky discusses disability not as a limit as it is often understood in dominant discourses, but as possibility to reflect on social relations, to appreciate difference, and to imagine lived experiences in new ways. Disability studies as a field is thus positioned within this book as offering onto-epistemological vantages from which one may critique and problematize often unquestioned societal able-bodied norms. Rather than framing disability as an individual problem, Titchkosky argues that disability represents a space to wonder about how people interact in social spaces, times, and contexts in understanding and producing particular cultural meanings of disability. Disability related issues of access are contextually discussed in university settings, yet ideas and topics are applicable to examinations of other societal institutions, systems, policies, and practices.

The book is organized into six chapters. In the first chapter, "Introduction: Access as an act of perception," Titchkosky demonstrates that questions of access relate to embodied ways of being in the world. She analytically unpacks social relations between people, organization of the material physical world, and how power relations shape and influence who belongs where and why. According to Titchkosky, "exploring the meanings of access is, fundamentally, the exploration of the meaning of our lives together—who is together with whom, how, where, when, and why" (p. 6). Thus, disability represents "a valuable interpretive space" (6) for thinking critically about being in the world among others, normalcy, and privilege often associated with able-ism. Titchkosky also provides an insightful discussion which problematizes the unquestioned use of person-first language, a discussion which is further touched upon in the following chapter.

In the subsequent chapter, "'Who?': Disability, identity and the question of belonging," the author discusses belonging in relation to university disability related accommodations and access. Issues of access thus represent a way to think about how disabled persons are understood and valued in particular university spaces. She uses the university as an arena to think about access as a complex process and form of consciousness. Thinking about access as a process connects to issues of inclusion and exclusion, identity, and equity and social justice. Understanding access as a process entails reflecting on embodied difference and thinking critically about belonging and who belongs in certain places, times, and contexts. In addition, she discusses how accounting procedures and measurements, bureaucratic policies, university practices, and processes relate to the central questions of "who belongs" and the ways particular disabled bodies are valued and devalued in social spaces (30). According to Titchkosky, "when disability is taken as something that basically does not belong, it allows for the management of disability as an exception" (34) where disability is often understood and treated as "essentially excludable" (39).

In chapter three, "'What'?: Representing disability," Titchkosky turns her attention to the appearance of disability and access images to ask: "What are we doing when we represent disability in the ways that we do?...What have we made disability to be?" (49). The author argues that depictions of disability through access images shape imaginations, representations, and constitutions of disabled subjects. Access signs and symbols also shape and orientate bodies in spaces. Dominant language is further used to represent and depict disability as deficit, lack, and a problem. Importantly, Titchkosky examines dominant ways of thinking, knowing, representing, and understanding disability by asking: "What if disability isn't so certain and isn't so distant?...What if, like breath itself, we share in disability's appearance?" (56). By posing questions such as these the author demonstrates that members of society are tied to the socio-cultural-political meanings of how disability and non-disability are imagined and produced.

In the next chapter "'Where?': To pee or not to pee," Titchkosky eloquently delivers the message that disability is a space to enact a "restless reflexive return" as a way of thinking and perceiving the world and "social meanings of embodiment" (69). The author urges people within the academy to consider the university as a socio-spatially situated site where political knowledge is produced and circulated on and about disability. She further argues that dominant narratives and ways of speaking about disability in language, images, policies, attitudes, imaginations, perceptions, and practices delimit what is "say-able" (74) about disability. The presumed absence of disability in space also requires critical reflection, methodological attention, and theorizing.

In chapter five, "'When? Not yet': The absence presence of disability in contemporary university life," bureaucratic organization of time is discussed in relation to university policy contexts and how disability is often represented as a problem. Through discussing the complex problematic nature of interpreting and enacting the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) in university contexts Titchkosky demonstrates how accommodation plans and policies require thoughtful on-going critical reflection.

Titchkosky, in the final chapter, "Towards a politics of wonder in disability studies," provokes readers to reflect on cultural meanings assigned to people, how such meanings are socially produced, and how they relate to issues of access. She states: "who are we when we belong, and where? This is a politics of wonder" (150). A politics of wonder entails critical reflexivity and engagement in questioning the limits of knowledges on disability, how particular knowledges on disability are organized, and the ways disability is socio-politically imagined. Doing so opens possibilities to reflect critically on the present and think otherwise, to question unquestioned and taken-for-granted knowledges about disability. Disability studies conceptualized as a field engaging in a politics of wonder means questioning the socio-cultural meanings of disability and understanding it to mean something "other than a problem" (139) but as a place to investigate the meaning of being human. According to Titchkosky, "the Question of Access must always remain a space for questioning" (150).

In discussions of space, specific socio-spatial theories and theorists remain largely absent from the conversation. Drawing on socio-spatial theories would add greater depth to theorizing access and reinforce Titchkosky's thought provoking arguments surrounding conceptualizations of bodies in space, disability and embodiment, and issues of access. When theorizing access there is also a need for more intersectional inquiry that examines race, class, and gender related issues in connection with disability.

Nevertheless, by framing access as a struggle, a process, and a site requiring further investigation, questioning, wonder, methodical consideration, and theorizing, Titchkosky makes a truly important contribution to Canadian and international disability studies scholarship. Questions of access probe at human struggle to know oneself as a person, to appreciate and understand difference, and to live in the world with others. In this way, reflecting critically on issues of access entails thinking about identity, place, and social relations. In terms of disability studies, Titchkosky illustrates the importance of engaging in a “politics of wonder” to explore lived experiences of disability that are often taken-for-granted as possessing qualities to reveal aspects of what it means to be human.

In The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning, the university represents an institutional site full of problems and possibilities. The representation of disability as a problem in university contexts is refuted, and instead disability is posited as transformative, as a place to critique broader socio-political norms, values, policies, and practices that (re)produce systemic barriers and attitudes relating to the marginality of disabled subjects.

Significantly, Titchkosky provides narrative accounts of her own lived experiences to explore disability through a “restless reflexive return” (69). In so doing, she engages in critical reflexivity on her positionality and demonstrates her desire to challenge dominant narratives and understandings of disability. She notes: “I am inhabited by dyslexia while cloaked in the protective privileges of white professor” (112). In terms of positionality, Titchkosky argues this entails thinking about “how do we position ourselves in the face of that which seems to already position us in schemes of identity and difference” (112). Titchkosky blurs lines between dichotomous conceptions of self and other, “normal/not normal, part/whole” to articulate that meanings and subject positions are often made in these liminal spaces, the spaces in-between. Thus, positionality in this sense also entails appreciating the institutional milieu and wider socio-cultural-political attitudes, values, and norms in which we find ourselves. Positionality, too, is a process and a site to wonder (112). She showcases the power of stories to open new avenues of thought on disability to wonder about who, what, where, and when matters. In this way, the “materiality” (6) of bodies and how particular bodies matter in social spaces can be further explored through questions of access. Access issues represent an important interpretive space which, according to Titchkosky, needs to be further examined and theorized.

Titchkosky demonstrates the potential of disability studies as a field of inquiry to challenge the dominant ways disability is often cast as “the exception to the rule” (9), “disruptive” (33), a problem, a “worst case scenario” (33), “essentially excludable” (39). Instead, disability is shown to be a political process which can also be a “way of perceiving” (4) and a “sense making device” (47). Engaging in a politics of wonder opens up possibilities to examine normalcy, embodiment, materiality of bodies, and avenues to think critically about socio-spatial temporal norms, to conceptually consider the real and imagined presence and absence of disability, and to ponder what it fully means to be human.