

Review: Titchkosky, Tanya. *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011.

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“What do contemporary access issues regarding disability in bureaucratic systems, such as the academy, actually *do* to our understanding of our lives together in social space?” (ix). This is the question driving Tanya Titchkosky’s recent book, *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning*. Titchkosky’s project is an exploration of “the social meaning of access from a disability studies perspective” (ix), and she uses the University of Toronto as her site of inquiry. This particular project is unique because it situates access within the bureaucratic walls of academia in order to unseat some of the naturalizing assumptions about disability that persist within academic settings.

Titchkosky approaches access from two major angles. First, she looks at access in terms of how it is “spoken of, acted upon, and sometimes resisted in university life” (x), leading to an examination of how exclusion and a lack of access are naturalized. That is, she examines how “natural” it is for certain spaces to be inaccessible or for certain groups of people to be excluded from these spaces. Titchkosky’s second point moves from a discussion of access to an argument for a “politics of wonder,” defined early on as “pausing in the face of what already *is*” (x). Ultimately, she argues for a new understanding of disability and disability studies, asking readers to suspend our preconceived notions about disability and, instead, to question critically how those understandings affect people socially.

Chapter One, “Access as an Act of Perception” is an introduction to this critical discussion of access. Titchkosky asks, “What if [access] is more like a way of judging or a way of perceiving?” (3), a question that points toward an understanding of access as an orientation to self, and to others, in social spaces. She connects this notion of orientation to disability itself, asserting that disability can—and should—be thought of as a way to understand ourselves, the people who surround us, and the places we inhabit. This viewpoint pushes against the perception of disability as “non-normalcy” and the idea that disability should be understood only in individual occurrences. Instead, Titchkosky seeks to denaturalize “what seems to be ‘natural’ exclusion” (6), the perception that disability is an inherent way of being. This examination of the social construction of disability as a collective perception, an orientation to self and social spaces, is foundational to this exploration of access.

Titchkosky’s framework for discussing access is modeled off the “W5 questions”: Who? what? when? where? why/how? (14). Chapter Two, “‘Who?’: Disability Identity and the Question of Belonging” focuses on the boundaries that are established between *normal* and *non-normal* participants of university life; specifically, Titchkosky argues that the space between “who we are” and “who we might become” (41) is ideal for questioning who is given access to certain spaces and what it means to be disabled or non-disabled in those spaces. This chapter is very important for understanding how university spaces are designed for particular bodies, and the refrain “You can’t accommodate everybody” (35) leads the discussion of how students with disabilities are seen even within academic institutions.

Chapter Three, “‘What?’: Representing Disability” focuses on how disability is represented and what it is collectively and culturally understood to be. Here, Titchkosky explores the various material signs of access, paying careful attention to the iconic blue and white

handicapped symbol, a sign that acknowledges that there are certain spaces where there is a *lack* of access because the sign itself is not present. Titchkosky argues that these signs naturalize our collective understandings that *certain* people need *special* signs that indicate their access to those spaces (64).

Chapter Four, “‘Where?’: To Pee or Not to Pee,” and Chapter Five, “‘When? Not Yet’: The Absent Presence of Disability in Contemporary University Life,” both explore common justifications for exclusion. In Chapter Four, Titchkosky argues against spaces that justify “disinterested caring,” (88) such as the halfhearted gesture of an icon of access, arguing instead for spaces where people can reflect critically on narratives of disability. In Chapter Five, she similarly argues that the presence of disability justifiably fades away from the social sphere into an absence, making it seem as if disability is not present at all within academic life (96).

Throughout these explorations of access, Titchkosky establishes a foundation for a politics of wonder, which is fully developed in Chapter 6: “Towards a Politics of Wonder in Disability Studies.” She defines a politics of wonder as “making uncertainty out of what is certain” (132). For Titchkosky, a politics of wonder is an attempt to think critically about the preexisting notions that we have about disability and to deconstruct the binaries of disabled versus nondisabled, wherein disability is seen as *other*. By asking “Who are we when we belong, and where?” (150), Titchkosky bridges the questions asked throughout this book in order to illuminate the importance of moving beyond acceptance of our current understandings of access and disability, which are often understood as accommodated within university settings.

The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning provides a very critical deconstruction of disability, disability studies, and even what it means to be dis/abled.

Titchkosky combines heavy theory with personal experiences to create narratives of what access

is and what it should be. Though she locates the University of Toronto as her site of study, we don't see a lot of that particular space, though she does make an effort to tell a brief story related to that space within each chapter. Though I would have liked to see more of Titchkosky's experiences as a dyslexic faculty member at the University of Toronto, the brief attention to that particular space allows readers to make connections to issues of access in their own university settings. Aside from personal anecdote, the prose can be very complicated and dense because Titchkosky engages with a lot of bureaucratic language as well as with theory. However, she is very careful in the opening and closing chapters to clearly outline her book's project. Likewise, there are clear signposts at the beginning and ends of each chapter that outline that chapter's purpose and connect the main points to the next chapter.

Overall, this is a brilliant text that asks readers to rethink their own critical understandings of access, even in the supposedly diverse and understanding settings of academia. This book will make a great addition to the scholarship on access as well as to disability studies scholarship more broadly. When Titchkosky provides anecdotes and examples about classroom spaces, hallways, and bathrooms, she is tapping into the already-established idea that spaces should be created for the accessibility of all, rather than the accessibility of some and accommodation of others. She argues that instead of putting wheels on classroom furniture or placing blue and white handicapped signs on bathroom doors in order to make these spaces more universally accessible, we need to think critically about these actions: *Who* do they serve? *What* image of accessibility do they create? *Where* are these spaces? *When* does accessibility occur? And finally, *why* and *how* do these actions create accessible spaces for all? These questions are at the center of *The Question of Access*, and for Titchkosky, they also fuel a politics of wonder.