

BOOK REVIEW

The question of access: disability, space and meaning, by Tanya Titchkosky, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2011, 177 pp., CAD\$24.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-4426-1000-2, \$55.00 (bound), ISBN 978-1-4426-4026-9

The Question of Access is a book which aims to convey the constructions of access in the context of higher education in Canada and which engages with deeply held (but disavowed) notions of who belongs in this and other bureaucracies. Titchkosky skilfully engages with policy, pedagogy, law and other formal structures whilst arguing that these alone do not make an enabling environment. Written in a post-structuralist framework which questions how we *do* and perform disability, she problematizes social space to articulate a politics of space, belonging and personhood that questions our fundamental encounters with one another – the beauty, potential and catastrophe of disabled and non-disabled people's often separated lives. Lives lived together and yet apart. In reading this book, I am reminded of Isaac Rosenberg's war poem where he states 'these meetings in dreams, how sad they are, when waking and walking about, there is no contact to the hand'. This sense of the achievable unachieved, the possible not made possible, runs through Titchkosky's narrative. She relates the question of access via her own testimony as a professor with dyslexia who despite statute, guidance and training, finds herself in a work that is officially hers, but ontologically unstable and conditional. The book could have been simply about the gap between rhetoric and reality in higher education and access policy, it could have discussed case law, human resource practice and staff/student committees more fully. Whilst it does of course marble its discussion with these points, the overall feel of the book is purposefully semiotic, it is at its strongest where it unpacks signs and symbols of access. Titchkosky notes:

I am most interested in examining how the lack of access for disabled people (and thus our absence) is naturalized to such an extent that even barriers and processes of exclusion are noticed they are still conceived as somehow natural, reasonable, sensible, and even seemingly justified. (xi)

Titchkosky provides a detailed exploration of how this duality of thinking sits beneath notions of reasonableness, one where reason and cost are somehow overriding considerations even where disabled people are serially excluded. This trade off and assumption of reasonableness is unpacked. In reading the book, you feel like the glacial creep of changing constructions of disability are being heard, that the book asks for a reevaluation of reason and reasonableness. Reason has of course always presented itself as just that. Centuries of world history make clear that ideologies have a central role in cementing the unreasonable as the reasonable, reason

and logic and not the product of human struggle and maldistribution of social resource. Indeed, although largely drawn at the meso-level of institutional struggle Titchkosky makes clear that paradoxically the very structures and systems set up to enable disabled people at times function as systems of exclusion and 'rational' justifications for those exclusions:

I also pursue the idea that the most ordinary or acceptable ways to speak of access and its improvement may in fact be a major barrier to the improvement of access. (xiii)

Similarly:

Matters of access and accommodation rely on and constitute, conceptions of who belongs and this remains true whether coat trees are provided or not-or whether classrooms are redesigned or not. (37)

This is borne out in the mismatch between departmental and university assertions over access alterations and the meeting of benchmarks sitting alongside heavy doors, commonly malfunctioning electrically operated doors and over-sized obtrusive signage. The book is logically ordered and is made up of six chapters, four of which explore the *who*, *what*, *where* and *when* of access. For example, the *who* chapter explores who is allowed to belong in the contemporary Canadian university? The *what* chapter focuses on the representation of access through signs and symbols. The *Where* chapter relates to instances of access being exercised as a right, yet as limiting the boundaries of access. The *when* chapter looks at moments of struggle where access might begin to be contested more fully. The chapter presents current policy documents and the absence of real influence by disability studies insights and disabled people. This presents a sense of access being mandated but 'not yet'. The end of the book sees an exploration of the 'politics of wonder' as Titchkosky calls it. This attempt to reevaluate, to acknowledge messiness and uncertainty affords a wondering of what might be achievable, how things could be otherwise. Lurking behind policies, protocols and practices according to Titchkosky are deep-rooted views that disability remains a calamity and an awkward challenge to 'normalcy':

In fact, disability today is so singularly well known as the space of unwanted calamity in need of cure, care or containment that it has become a space par excellence for the ongoing workings of colonialism, state management and the governing of modern versions of selfhood. (17)

Even where structures are extensive and apparently pervasive, the fragility and conditionality of personhood are very real as Titchkosky notes:

Dyslexia is also assumed to make sense of, or even announce, a person's transition from friendly-privileged-white-woman to a lost individual requiring assistance. (44-45)

The paradoxical politics and signifiers of access are contained in the following examination of the iconic images of access such as the international wheelchair symbol:

Still, even in this clear image of disability, the spirit of ambiguity resides: the existence of the universal sign for *access* is reliant on an exclusive and exclusionary physical

environment. In order for a sign to point towards access, there must be an assumption of a general lack of access. (61)

The Question of Access is an important contribution to the literature on higher education, personhood, the limits of policy and legislation and the power of ableist or disablist structures. Not everyone will favour the narrow focus of the book—one person, one institution, and at times the question of agency and resistance might have been marshalled more extensively. The evidence that institutional barriers predated neo-liberalism might have made for greater analyses as to just what the (undoubted) problem of neo-liberalism is. However within the parameters set this is a very instructive and engaging read from someone who experiences the problems discussed in the book first hand.

Alan Roulstone

University of Northumbria, Newcastle, UK

alan.roulstone@northumbria.ac.uk; a.roulstone@leeds.ac.uk

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