

Nirmala Erevelles

Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011

ISBN 978-0230100183

Michelle N. Huang (Pennsylvania State University)

Michelle N. Huang is a PhD candidate in the english and women's studies departments at Pennsylvania State University. Her interests include Asian American literature, feminist theory, and disability studies in twentieth- and twenty-first-century American literature.

Nirmala Erevelles's accomplishment in this interdisciplinary scholarly study is to advance an intersectional framework of disability analysis that takes into consideration gender and race. Because disability is so often deployed intersectionally, a more comprehensive understanding of its vicissitudes must broach both methodological and disciplinary boundaries (31). Erevelles, an associate professor of social foundations of education at the University of Alabama, draws an emphasis on historical materialism from transnational feminism and a critique of compulsory normativity from disability studies, braiding them together to create a multifaceted critical framework. Although Erevelles's perceptive text cuts many ways, it is best understood as a transnational feminist intervention in mainstream disability studies, which Erevelles argues has primarily "theorize[d] disability through the medium of experience and textuality/discourse" (5). Erevelles asks difficult questions often elided in interpretations of disability that take into account only its emancipatory potential---for example, "How is disability celebrated if its very existence is inextricably linked to the violence of social/economic conditions of capitalism?" (17). Although *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts* cannot, and does not purport to, offer complete answers to the questions it poses, the book incisively shows that feminist theory has much to contribute, but also much to learn, about its engagement with disability.

Over an introduction and six chapters, Erevelles draws from a diverse archive of texts, including personal experience, historical events, educational case studies, literature, and philosophy. Several keywords emerge, namely "historical," "actual," and "material." Although Erevelles's methodology acknowledges the important contributions of poststructural analysis to disability studies (notable theorists she mentions include Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari), she is dissatisfied with the field's turn away from historical materialism (10). Erevelles thus calls for a renewed engagement with the material conditions of production, arguing that "For feminist disability studies to make good its claims for transformative politics, it would have to expand its analytics from discursive interventions to a foregrounding of the materiality of structural constraints that actually give rise to the oppressive binaries of self/other, normal/disabled, and us/them" (129). Enabling a transformative body politic requires "living theory" as well as "theorizing life" (7). Erevelles thus chooses to open her introduction with the very personal: the diagnosis and eventual death of Erevelles's partner, University of Alabama english professor Robert Young, from brain cancer. Erevelles documents how Young's suddenly "unpredictable embodiment"---"seizures, headaches, nausea, bruises,

infections, and edema"---that resulted from his brain tumor highlights the limits of "a social context where rationality is the precondition for the recognition of personhood," a salient point that underwrites much of the text (11).

In the text's first chapter, "Disability as 'Becoming': Notes on the Political Economy of the Flesh," Erevelles focuses on the Middle Passage to show how disability and race have been relationally configured to create the wealth of the so-called First World. She asks us to construe disability as a "historical event," one that carries within it the structural conditions of its possibility (63). To illustrate her argument, Erevelles offers a rereading of Hortense Spillers's essay on the formative influence of the transatlantic slave trade on African American identity, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (Spillers 1987). Erevelles expands on Spillers's claim that race is a commodity fetish to argue that disability also holds a use value. Her analysis does not argue that race *is* a disability, nor suggest a simple congruence between the two, but, rather, carefully shows how a disability studies reading unpacks the counterintuitive process through which "in becoming disabled . . . the black body is at the height of its profitability" (39).

Erevelles uses a transnational and critical race feminist lens to dissect domestic educational policy in chapter 2, "Of Ghosts and Ghetto Politics: Embodying Educational Policy as if Disability Mattered." Drawing on Erevelles's background as an educator, the chapter cogently takes up disability's (in)visibility in the American educational system. She examines the antinomies of education, which despite its rhetorical positioning as a zone of empowerment for marginalized students, nonetheless "demands the simultaneous submissive visibility and ruthless erasure of the bodies of colonized others" (66). The ghetto, Erevelles argues, is created by "institutional violence," a repository for "unruly bodies" in need of discipline (85). In response, she suggests that ethical education entails resisting "sexual denial under the guise of protection" and acknowledging the sexual desires and capabilities of the disabled. Against the fantasy of the docile normative body, Erevelles poses the excess of crip poetics, which holds the potential to "expand normative notions of sexual pleasure and eroticism" and to dislocate disability's relationship to sexuality as merely fetishism or kinkiness (89). This chapter serves as a much-appreciated reminder of the transformative potential of poetic expression and embodied desire to enact transgressive sexual politics.

In chapter 3, "'Unspeakable' Offenses: Disability Studies at the Intersections of Multiple Differences," Erevelles augments Kimberlé Crenshaw's foundational concept of intersectionality to articulate a framework that works "intracategorically" within the categories of race and disability (101). This chapter is co-authored with Andrea Minear, a professor of elementary education at the University of West Alabama-Livingston. Bringing race, class, gender, and disability into their analysis, the authors offer two extended case studies. The first examines the systemic mistreatment of Junius Wilson, a deaf man born and raised in North Carolina in the early twentieth century, who was castrated and institutionalized after wrongfully being accused of rape. Long after the charges of rape were dropped, he was kept in the criminal ward of a state hospital because it was "the most benevolent course of action" (Burch and Joyner 2007, 1, cited in Erevelles, 107). The second case study describes a young black girl named Cassie Smith, a recent student of Minear's. The authors show that the educational system's failure toward Cassie--which resulted in her mistreatment, marginalization, and almost expulsion---was too easily

sanctioned by her label as learning-disabled (114). Erevelles and Minear ask us to consider how these two individuals were methodically disenfranchised by the very "institutions (legal, rehabilitative, and educational) that were designed to nurture and empower them" (115). Feminist theory is not delivered top-down, but cultivated bottom-up, and this chapter shows how intersectional analysis remains a necessary intervention in contemporary scholarship.

Erevelles foregrounds a "transnational feminist disability studies perspective" in chapter 4, "Embodied Antinomies: Feminist Disability Studies Meets Third World Feminism" (123). By examining the media treatment of Hurricane Katrina's aftermath, Erevelles argues that the "Third World" "serves merely as a metaphor for the 'natural' state of utter destitution witnessed in nations overpopulated by people of color, whose 'natural' conditions of despair, destitution, and dirt cause them to live out their lives in perpetual crises" (125). The abject conditions of post-Katrina New Orleans were used to illustrate how "not normal" Katrina was, a move that ignored the deep structural inequalities that already plagued pre-Katrina New Orleans. Erevelles smartly shows how the relative silence on disability from Third World feminists is an unfortunate by-product of the already difficult task of attaining visibility without being cast as victims of culture. Erevelles sharply criticizes feminist disability studies scholarship's failure to acknowledge that the pleasures of a fluid subjectivity "can only be harnessed within certain privileged material contexts that these scholars appear to take for granted" (129). That disabled Third World Women typically only garner what Erevelles calls a "'deadly' recognition---only when it suits our purposes"---demands a denaturalization of current paradigms of feminist political visibility and possibility (145).

If, as Erevelles suggests, current conceptions of democratic deliberation fall short of accommodating disability, what does this failure mean about the integrity of its governance? Chapter 5, "(Im)material Citizens: Cognitive Disability, Race, and the Politics of Citizenship," poses cognitive disability as a limit case for traditional paradigms of citizenship and rights that rely on assumptions of ability (148). The constraints of formal justice, which "only serves as the watchdog for inappropriate behaviors that can easily be proven in a court of law," reinforce individually based conceptions of justice and citizenship (155). Inequality is thus legally construed as actions against individuals, leaving unaddressed systemic policies and structures that marginalize communities and groups. Using Judith Butler's iterative performativity and Donna Haraway's cyborg posthumanism, Erevelles proposes an ontology that conceives "dependency as constitutive of human identity" in order to avoid the perils of individualism as well as the unenforceable voluntarism espoused by some feminist ethics of care theorists (163). This new ontology decouples citizenship from market value, so that democracy may be achieved as a *result*, rather than merely as *process* (170).

Chapter 6, "The 'Other' Side of the Dialectic: Toward a Materialist Ethic of Care," functions as a response to the criticisms of citizenship posed in chapter 5. Erevelles theorizes an ethics of care structured around a dialectical relationship with its conditions of production, rather than a reciprocal paradigm between caregiver and care recipient. The reciprocal model is problematic, Erevelles argues, not only because feminist conceptions of care can be uncritically romantic, but also because they can inadvertently reaffirm humanist notions of autonomy (176). As a result, feminist ethics can problematically create a discursive double bind for the disabled, where recipients of care are characterized simultaneously as lacking independence and also as

exploiters of their caregivers (180). Erevelles is thus suspicious of the assumptions of autonomy undergirding the production and maintenance of disability, including a welfare state that "has gone to great lengths to construct objective criteria to define the 'disability' category, [but] has seldom taken the time to investigate the economic conditions that have rendered individuals 'disabled' in relation to the market economy" (185). The chapter closes with a discussion of the transformative potential of affective citizenship, which can productively reconfigure the relationality between caregivers and care recipients, and in turn, disabled subjectivity (193-94). Thus, although affect is in some respects always intangible and ineffable, Erevelles suggests our discussion of it does not have to be. On the contrary, it is at our peril that we ignore the traffic between the affective economy and the conditions of its production and consumption.

Disability and Difference in Global Contexts is an ambitious exploration into a nascent, but important, area of study. Although this meticulously researched, forcefully argued book sometimes appears scattered in approach, Erevelles deserves much credit for putting together the difficult conversations sustained in her text. Her emphasis on historical materialism is well taken, but the text would have benefited from a more constructive approach toward the work of imagination. At one point, Erevelles critiques posthumanist scholars by arguing that "By locating their emancipatory practices within the space of the social imaginary, as opposed to actual materiality of economic conditions, [they] continue to uphold an idealist vision of emancipation that may never be achieved because it exists within the realm of fantasy" (48).¹ The suggestion that the "social imaginary" is immaterial discounts that the imagination allows us critical access to worlds other than the one we have inherited. Privileging materialist conditions over discursive ones maintains a sharp divide between the two, when, as Erevelles herself shows, it is their dialectical interplay that structures our world and allows for the possibility of transformation (144). Minor criticisms aside, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts* represents not only a deep engagement with the foundational tenets of feminist thinking, but also the introduction of new critical frameworks of thought surrounding disability studies that raise difficult questions and issues from which all feminist scholars can learn.

References

- Burch, Susan, and Hannah Joyner. 2007. *Unspeaking: The story of Junius Wilson*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Spillers, Hortense J. 1987. Mama's baby, papa's maybe: An American grammar book. *Diacritics* 17 (2): 64-81.

¹ Another example: "[Hardt and Negri] suggest that we can imagine our way toward an emancipatory existence. But we know this is not true . . ." (195).