

***Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic* by Nirmala Erevelles. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 240 pp. ISBN 978-0230100183 (hbk)**

Reviewed by: Simmy Sahdra, Osgoode Hall Law School, York University

Oppression, exploitation, social injustices, widening inequalities, and the further solidification of social hierarchies within the current neoliberal environment are some of the results of transnational capitalism, which has created an environment of persistent social injustices for people associated with social differences,¹ who are more vulnerable to oppression and exploitation by the market forces and structure of capitalism. In *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic*, Nirmala Erevelles analyses disability in relation to other social differences within the context of transnational capitalism to further develop critical disability studies, and uncover the complex relationship between the disabled and nondisabled world within the context of transnational capitalism. Erevelles utilizes a historical materialist theoretical approach to disability coupled with personal narratives to contextualize social differences and answer questions of why social differences and social injustices continue to persist. Through the holistic theoretical analysis in which she engages, Erevelles provides a unique and necessary addition to critical disability studies.

Erevelles uses a historical materialist framework to analyze how "... the disabled body is constituted within the social relations of production and consumption of transnational capitalism, to foreground the implications these social/economic arrangements have for making bodies matter (or not)" (p. 7). While I agree with Erevelles' argument, I question her use of the term "the disabled body" as a synecdoche for disabled people. To place focus only on "the body" is to

¹ I use the term social differences in reference to Erevelles' (1998) dissertation. I expand the definition of social differences to refer to the reproduction of gender, sexuality, race, age, ability, class, nationality, and caste as social constructions within transnational capitalism, to disadvantage and oppress people associated with social differences.

move away from the many facets of the lived realities and experiences of people associated with social differences. However, Erevelles' focus on the body is deployed in a helpful and effective way when she traces the production of disability through the body, showing how during the Enlightenment the normative was constructed as the hierarchically superior European, bourgeois, heterosexual, white, healthy, male body. One of the most notable strengths of Erevelles's work relative to the field of critical disability studies as a whole is her contextualization of the production of disability and the political economy of disability in relation to other social differences such as race, gender, sexuality, class and nationality within a context of transnational capitalism.

Erevelles overcomes possible criticisms associated with the homogenization of disability in relation to multiple social differences by acknowledging how disability differs from the construction of other social differences. Erevelles discusses the problematic deployment of disability as a natural and undesirable condition in efforts to make evident the historicity and constructedness of other social categories, such as race, class, gender and sexual orientation. These categories are often constructed in opposition to disability in claims that in the absence of discrimination-based disadvantages, members of these groups can compete on an equal footing with those unmarked by social differences, unlike disabled people. This leaves disability in a difficult position relative to other social categories of difference, as disabled people often cannot make a similar claim to normativity. Erevelles argues that many of those "who espouse radical discourses seem unable to reconceptualize an alternative world without being locked into the political constructions of what constitutes the limits of humanness" (p. 32), and as she notes, these constructions are rooted in capitalist definitions of ability and efficiency. Erevelles argues that instead of adopting this problematic approach, social theories of difference should locate

oppression not within the bodies of individuals, but in attitudes, language, and the historical, social, political, and economic conditions of social life, including the capitalist structure of society.

Erevelles' analysis of "the material effects of ableism" is particularly illuminating. As she explains, ableism

result[s] in the removal and/or erasure of disability even in social practices that purport to be inclusive ... the prerequisite for the inclusion of disabled people in mainstream society requires their assimilation (via special education, rehabilitation, and assistive technology) or their complete annihilation (euthanasia, abortion of disabled fetuses)" (p. 33).

Thus, Erevelles offers an important critique of the social model of disability: It is not only society that creates barriers for people with disabilities, rather there is an expectation for people with disabilities to conform as much as possible to a normative standard constructed to benefit the capitalist system. Erevelles furthers her critique of the social model of disability to include the treatment of people with disabilities as "an object that must be acted upon by the world to fix, rather than as having ontological significance" (p. 35). The social model of disability continues to reproduce the removal of the ontological significance of people with disabilities, and reinforces their need to assimilate to the norm in order to gain any significance in a capitalist society.

Erevelles demonstrates the critical importance of engaging in an intersectional analysis that accounts for disability alongside other differences, including race, because the failure to do so has violent consequences for those caught at the interstices of multiplicative differences in relation to transnational capitalism. This is an important addition to critical disability studies, which has often failed to engage seriously with intersectionality.

Erevelles then utilizes an embodied policy analysis to analyze sex education in public school system in the United States, explaining how discourses of sexuality rely on the ideology of the normate to segregate, to exclude, and to dehumanize sexual subjects who disregard the rules of normativity. From there, Erevelles moves into the analysis of the material and discursive construction of citizenship as a means of supporting and reproducing social differences, by devaluing people associated with social differences and in many cases restricting their access to civil and social citizenship. Erevelles points out that this kind of exclusion also takes place in disability communities and organizing, discussing the erasure of cognitively disabled people from the disability rights movement.

Erevelles next engages in an intersectional theorization of ability as property, showing how the abilities rewarded by capitalism typically exclude disabled people, which limits disabled people's access to the market and therefore to citizenship. The conceptualization of ability as property reveals how the capitalist system works to reproduce social differences, and to oppress, exclude and exploit people associated with social differences.

While Erevelles' work is clearly an invaluable contribution to scholarship within critical disability studies, I would suggest that this book could be strengthened by the inclusion of a discussion of the integral role the state plays in protecting transnational capitalism, and reproducing social differences and social injustices, as outlined by Ellen Meiskins Wood in her book, *Empire of Capital*, in which she shows how capitalism is reliant on the structure and power of the state. As Wood (2003) explains, the state provides "stability and predictability by supplying an elaborate legal and institutional framework, backed up by coercive force to sustain the property relations of capitalism [such as the exploitation of workers], its complex contractual apparatus and its intricate financial transactions" (p. 17). Wood also theorizes the connection

between states, capitalism and militarized violence, which is used as a means of achieving specific capitalist objectives as well as to maintain the kind of “stability” capitalism requires. Further, the connection between militarized violence and capitalism ensures the production of impairment through war.

Erevelles’ use of a historical materialist framework contextualizes the production of disability within transnational capitalism, showing how it is related to other social differences. However, an incorporation of an analysis of role the state in transnational capitalism would have further strengthened her discussion. Overall, Erevelles’ work is an important exposition of how transnational capitalism produces situations that intersect with social differences to ensure that a few people win big, while the majority of people lose big.

References

- Erevelles, N. (1998). *Bodies that do not matter: Social policy, education, and the politics of difference* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from UMI. (Order No. 9904241)
- Erevelles, N. (2012). *Disability and difference in global contexts: Enabling a transformative body politic*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wood, E. M. (2003). *Empire of Capital*. London, UK: Verso Books.