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Book Review

We Were Never the Problem: Reclaiming Disability Through Indigenous Worldviews

A Review of *Indigenous Disability Studies*, edited by John T. Ward

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Abstract

This book review critically engages with *Indigenous Disability Studies*, edited by John T. Ward, through the lens of a Native Hawaiian researcher, educator, and student. The review explores how the book reframes disability through Indigenous worldviews rooted in relationality, cultural continuity, and decolonial resistance. The review offers a personal and cultural reflection on how the text deepened the author's understanding of disability history and connected to traditional Hawaiian views that recognize disability as sacred ability.

Keywords: Indigenous Epistemology, Indigenous Disability Studies, Self-Determination, Disability Justice

We Were Never the Problem: Reclaiming Disability Through Indigenous Worldviews

A Review of *Indigenous Disability Studies*, edited by John T. Ward

Too often, disability is framed through Western colonial lenses: as an individual impairment, a deficit, a liability, or as something that must be fixed or managed. In contrast, the 2025 anthology *Indigenous Disability Studies,* edited by John T. Ward, offers a bold reframing. Centering the voices of Elders, scholars, caregivers, and community leaders from across the globe, the anthology challenges dominant Western models of disability that have historically silenced, pathologized, or erased Indigenous perspectives and instead uplifts Indigenous worldviews grounded in relationality, community belonging, ancestral knowledge, and sovereignty. At its core, the book affirms Indigenous self-determination, recognizing that communities must have the authority to define, lead, and govern their approaches to disability, care, and inclusion in ways that reflect their own cultural and political values. The insights shared in this book are not simply intellectual interventions, but reminders of what it means to be in good relation with ourselves, our kaiāulu (communities), and our ʻāina (land).

While the book itself does not explicitly center Hawaiian or Pacific Islander perspectives, I approach it through the lens of a Kānaka ʻŌiwi (Native Hawaiian) educator, researcher, and student, situated within a community long shaped by colonial policies and impositions on education, health, and ability. This review draws connections between the book's global Indigenous frameworks and the lived experiences, values, and histories of Kānaka ʻŌiwi. This review is not a summary of what the book claims about Hawaiʻi, but rather a reflection on how its insights resonate deeply within our own cultural context and offer pathways for grounding disability justice in our ways of knowing and being. For those of us who have witnessed the pathologization of ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi (Hawaiian Language),

traditional learning styles, and extended family caregiving structures, the book speaks to something deeper than theory. It resonates. It affirms what many of us have always known: our differences were never the problem. We were never the problem. Colonialism was.

The Structure and Scope of the Book

The book is organized into five 'threads' or sections, each reflecting thematic and cultural interconnections and building on one another like braided strands of knowledge across more than 30 chapters. The sections, as follows, hold together like a woven lei of lived experience, analysis, and cultural memory, offering not only insight but also invitation. Each thread of this lei contributes its own distinct texture and fragrance, grounded in the voices and experiences of Indigenous peoples. Together, they form a rich, interconnected story that challenges and reimagines how we understand disability, care, and community.

Part I: The Power, Wisdom, Knowledge, and Lived Experiences of Elders begins with powerful testimonies from respected community leaders, such as Elder Annie Smith St-Georges and Peter Nakoochee, whose mo'olelo (stories) reveal how Indigenous students have been misdiagnosed and pathologized under colonial schooling systems. I appreciated that the anthology begins here, not just as an editorial intent, but in alignment with cultural protocol in many Indigenous communities: Elders come first. Their contributions are not simply stories from the past, but teachings that guide the present and inform the future. As the text reminds us, these individuals are not only cultural keepers, but also educators, spiritual leaders, political organizers, and healers who have shaped community knowledge in times of conflict and change. One distinct example is Elder Annie Smith St-Georges, an Algonquin Elder whose chapter challenges how colonial education systems have pathologized language differences. She shares an illuminating story of being labeled as "disabled" and "unable to learn" not because of an actual language difference but because her brain processed her first

language, Algonquin, before English. She later recognized that this difference in language structure would appear to non-Indigenous people to be a disability. "*It's my language. It's my brain set – that's my culture, that's my way of speaking. That's who I am,*" she states. This framing is powerful, especially for Indigenous peoples who have witnessed the marginalization of their language, culture, learning styles, and practices. The narratives of the Elders in Part I highlight how language, cultural values, and colonial trauma intersect to create educational and psychological barriers that are then labeled as disabilities.

Part II: Reframing the Narrative – Navigating Self-Representation offers insight into how Indigenous people navigate identity, belonging, and disability within and against the constraints of colonial narratives. It explores how Indigenous people with disabilities understand and represent themselves, challenge imposed labels and diagnostic categories, demonstrating the power of speaking from place, culture, and embodied truth. This chapter feels particularly resonant for Indigenous peoples whose sense of identity and belonging have been disrupted, reshaped, and rewritten by imposed systems–education, law, religion, even language itself. The chapters move across Turtle Island, South America, Mauritius, Nepal, and Algeria, showing that colonialism's reach may be global, but so is Indigenous resilience. What stands out in this section is the emphasis on *transcendent identity*—how individuals carry and express Indigeneity across territories, generations, and social positions. Identity here is not fixed but evolving, shaped by migration, trauma, reconnection, and responsibility.

One chapter notes, "identity is a complex and ever-changing path to understanding oneself that is constructed by a multitude of intersectionalities and dimensions that all contribute to the identity of self," especially when tribal language, ceremony, or physical appearance have been disrupted or denied. For many Indigenous people, including Kānaka ʻŌiwi, this complexity feels familiar. Many in our kaiāulu carry the weight of their

mo‘okūauhau (genealogy) disrupted by historical trauma, loss of land, attempted erasures, and assimilation policies. Navigating identity often means moving between worlds: school and home, Western and Indigenous, colonial and cultural, and choosing, sometimes daily, how to hold those contradictions with dignity. The stories in this section remind us that to claim our identity is a form of resistance, and that disability itself, when viewed through an Indigenous lens, is often understood not as limitation but as relational capacity, responsibility, and gift. What I liked about this section was that it doesn't just tell stories of other communities, but it invites us to listen and explore our own. It reminds us that healing and self-definition are intertwined, and that reframing disability requires reframing the self.

Part III: Learning from Within – Including Traditional Knowledge elevates Indigenous sign languages and epistemologies, such as Plains Indian Sign Language and Yolŋu Sign Language, as critical tools of identity, resistance, and wellness. Drawing on contributions from Australia, South Africa, Canada, Taiwan, the U.S., and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, these chapters emphasize that Indigenous understandings of ability are deeply rooted in relationship, oral history, ceremony, and holistic care. The knowledge shared here is not theoretical. It is ancestral, it is lived, and it is embodied in practice and place. Throughout this section, the emphasis on traditional knowledge challenges the idea that disability support must come from professionalized, western institutions. Instead, the authors show how cultural protocols, storytelling, and intergenerational care offer models for inclusion that are grounded in community and respect. For Indigenous peoples, learning doesn't happen in isolation–it happens *with* and *through* others. This idea is central to both education and healing. In many ways, Part III feels like a call to re-anchor ourselves in the practices that have always sustained us, even when colonial systems told us they weren't valid. It's not about going "back" to tradition–it's about recognizing that our knowledge

systems were never lost. They've been carried, protected, and passed down, and they have much to teach the world about what true inclusion looks like.

Part IV: Challenging Colonial Authority – Infusing Regional Ideals and Concepts takes a more explicitly political turn, examining how Indigenous communities resist, reinterpret, and transform colonial models of disability by reclaiming their own regional and cultural concepts. The authors of this section push back against settler-colonial definitions of ability and education, highlighting the lasting impacts of imposed systems and the healing potential of culturally rooted alternatives. What grounds this section is its clarity: colonialism isn't just historical–it is ongoing, especially in how institutions define who is "disabled," who is "normal," and who deserves support. Several chapters critique how Western education systems label Indigenous children with learning differences as deficient, while ignoring how those same systems fail to accommodate diverse ways of knowing and processing. One chapter offers a simple but transformative shift: "*by looking beyond the 'dis,' we can see the 'abilities'*"–a reminder that language itself can either empower or erase.

This section also centers frameworks like the Indigenous Critical Disability Theory and the Sweetgrass Method, a culturally responsive framework for working with Indigenous students and families. It weaves together three strands: introspection, communication, and continuity. It challenges educators to move beyond surface-level accommodations and toward genuine relationships, responsibility, and shared growth. We are reminded here that to challenge colonial authority in disability discourse, we must first name it, then rebuild from the wisdom that has always been there. This isn't just policy work. It's cultural work. It's remembering that Indigenous peoples are not "service users" or "beneficiaries"—we are the knowledge keepers, the caregivers, the creators of systems rooted in aloha, pilina, and kuleana. We are our kūpuna's wildest dreams.

Part V: Interpretations, Narratives, and Lived Experiences of Grassroots Teachers and Social Service Providers brings us to the ground level, where the work of disability, care, and survival is not abstract, but immediate. Featuring mo‘olelo from Uganda, Taiwan, and other often-overlooked regions, this final section centers grassroots practitioners and social service providers, many of whom are publishing for the first time. Their reflections are raw, grounded in daily realities, and shaped by histories of colonial violence, poverty, and global inequality, revealing how colonization, war, disease, and poverty have created and compounded disability. Yet rather than present these conditions as limiting, the authors frame them as urgent calls for recognition, equity, and connection and emphasizes the creativity and resilience of local educators and care workers.

One of the most powerful contributions of this section is its insistence on expanding how we define both *disability* and *Indigenous*. These stories challenge Western frameworks that view disability only through a medical lens. In many of the contexts described, disability arises not just from genetic or developmental differences, but from war, displacement, illness, or acts of torture. The consequences of colonialism, whether through land theft, conflict, or extractive economies, are more than just historical events. They are ongoing sources of harm that create and compound disability every day. What also stands out in Part V is the emphasis on community-based care. In places where formal systems are limited or dangerous, teachers, aunties, neighbors, and cultural practitioners often step in as caregivers and healers. Their work isn’t “professionalized” in the Western sense, but it is deeply relational, rooted in a sense of kuleana to others. These stories remind us that disability justice can’t be confined to legal mandates or service plans. It must include everyday acts of survival, solidarity, and cultural continuity.

A Kānaka ʻŌiwi Reflection

I chose *Indigenous Disability Studies* because I wanted to engage with a text that not only aligned with my academic interests but also spoke directly to my cultural and lived experience as a Native Hawaiian educator, scholar, and student. As someone committed to reframing systems of education, health, and governance through Indigenous worldviews, I was drawn to this book's promise of an intersectional, decolonial approach to disability. Most of what I've read in the field is shaped by Euro-American academic traditions. I wanted to read a book that uplifted Indigenous knowledge systems and relational values. Furthermore, I've long observed that our kaiāulu continues to navigate complex realities where colonialism, educational marginalization, and systemic health inequities intersect with disability in profound ways. I selected this book hoping it would provide both global insight and community-grounded strategies that I could bring into my own work with Native Hawaiian students and families.

Reading *Indigenous Disability Studies* through a Native Hawaiian lens brings layered insights. The text felt less like a detached academic work and more like a gathering of voices with whom I have pilina to. The authors' stories called to mind my own kūpuna, who faced institutionalization for speaking ʻōlelo Hawaiʻi, and to the keiki, haumāna, and future of our lāhui, who still struggle in school systems designed to measure assimilation, not brilliance. These reflections are deeply personal. They are about the people I come from.

This book expanded my understanding of disability history by placing it within the broader context of colonization, Indigenous resistance, cultural continuity, and relational worldviews. It shifted disability from being a legal or biomedical issue to something deeply historical, spiritual, and political. Most importantly, it helped me to understand how

colonization doesn't simply respond to disability–it actively produces it in Indigenous communities through disconnection from land, from language, and from cultural practices of care. This book reframes disability not as an individual impairment but as something shaped by structural violence, cultural suppression, and systemic exclusion. In one of the chapters, Kevin P. Morgan states, "I used to feel as if I lived between two worlds... now I am firmly grounded in my Indigenous identity." This line not only resonated with me, it also reminded me of my own experience growing up in a Native Hawaiian household, where I was taught that traditional Hawaiian views of disability were very different from Western ones. In our culture, disability was not something to be fixed or hidden. It was often seen as a natural part of life, and individuals with disabilities were understood to carry unique insight, gifts, and kuleana. They were not excluded but recognized for their unique contributions to the community–sometimes as healers, seers, or teachers. Disability, in this context, was not a deficit. It was a sacred ability. But in school, those same traits were pathologized. Curricula, testing, and classroom norms taught me that those differences were something to hide, manage, or overcome. What was honored in community became stigmatized in institutional settings.

Morgan's words helped me name something I have long felt: that returning to Indigenous frameworks is not just a cultural preference, it's a political act of restoration. That kind of grounding–of being "firmly" rooted in Indigenous identity–is what I now understand as essential for Indigenous students, families, and cultural practitioners. Whether we are navigating classrooms, clinics, or courts, we must be able to define ourselves and our differences through our own knowledge systems. This book affirmed that the history of disability, for Indigenous peoples, cannot be understood apart from the history of colonization and the ongoing work of reclaiming identity, language, and relational care.

Recommendations and Further Engagement

I would highly recommend *Indigenous Disability Studies*, not only to students in disability studies, but to educators, public health professionals, social workers, policymakers, cultural practitioners, and advocates for those supporting Indigenous peoples with disabilities. Disability Studies has long lacked meaningful engagement with Indigenous epistemologies. By offering a perspective rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing, this book fills a critical gap in the field–one that remains largely underexplored. It centers Indigenous authors not just as contributors, but as architects of theory, care, and resistance. In doing so, it creates space for Indigenous peoples to tell their own stories, reclaim narrative authority, and redefine disability on their own terms–grounded in community, culture, and continuity. It shows that disability justice cannot exist without Indigenous sovereignty and cultural resurgence. I appreciated that the book is rooted in story and ceremony. It doesn't just present arguments, it models what Indigenous pedagogy looks like. Readers are invited to sit with Elders, to listen across generations and geographies, to engage with frameworks like the Sweetgrass Method that prioritize emotional and spiritual integrity. It teaches through rhythm, relationship, and reflection. This is a pedagogy that centers process over product, connection over hierarchy, and healing over performance. It challenges Western academic conventions that often separate mind from body, theory from practice, and emotion from analysis. Instead, it invites the reader into a learning space that is accountable, relational, and alive. For Indigenous readers, especially those who have felt alienated in academic spaces, this approach feels like home. It reminds us that our ways of knowing are not only valid, but vital–and that learning can be a form of ceremony, remembrance, and resurgence. For educators, scholars, and practitioners who work with and in Indigenous communities, this book is an invaluable

resource. We are often asked to practice cultural sensitivity within systems that offer little to no culturally rooted frameworks. This book offers those tools.

This book sparked many questions and areas of future learning. Two stand out for me. First, I want to learn more about how Indigenous Critical Disability Theory (ICDT) might be adapted for Pacific Islander contexts. ICDT critiques settler definitions of disability and calls for frameworks based on relationality and sovereignty. How might Native Hawaiian thinkers expand this to reflect our own values, practices, and genealogies of care and wellness? What would a Native Hawaiian disability framework look like, rooted in cultural protocol and kinship? Second, I would like to explore how Native communities in the Pacific are reclaiming Indigenous sign languages and communication methods as tools for inclusion. The section on Plains Indian Sign Language, for example, reminded me of Hawaiian Sign Language (HSL) and its near disappearance. What would it look like to have HSL integrated into the State of Hawai‘i’s Department of Education classrooms, ceremonies, and community life, not as accommodation, but as continuation?

Conclusion

Indigenous Disability Studies is a transformative book. It challenges colonial definitions of disability, uplifts Indigenous wisdom, and offers a future rooted in resistance, cultural resurgence, and care. For me, it was more than an academic text. It was a ceremony of unlearning colonial framings of disability and reconnecting with frameworks grounded in ancestral knowledge, community accountability, and self-determination. It affirmed what I know to be true as a Native Hawaiian: that difference is not a deficit, and that our kūpuna left us with everything we need to care for one another.

For Native Hawaiian and other Indigenous communities still navigating the legacies of colonization, forced assimilation, and systemic inequities, this book offers both a mirror

and a guide. It also calls those of us in academia to be more intentional in how we teach, research, and support Indigenous students with disabilities—not through the lens of accommodation alone, but through approaches that honor their full identities, histories, and cultural contributions.

This is a vital offering for anyone working toward disability justice through a culturally accountable lens–especially those in disability services, Indigenous education, public policy, or social work. It invites us to mālama not only each other, but also our mo‘olelo, our languages, and the systems we are called to rebuild in their honor. Perhaps most importantly, it should be read in community–with space for reflection, dialogue, and connection to our own stories and lands. Because as the text so powerfully reminds us: disability is not brokenness–it is brilliance the system has failed to recognize.

We are not problems to be solved.

We are not broken or in need of fixing.

We are not case files, diagnoses, or deficits in a system designed without us.

We are knowledge holders.

We are leaders.

We are the evidence of our kūpuna’s endurance.

We are their wildest dreams.

We are change makers, reclaiming what has always been ours.

We were never the problem.

References

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