

Book Review

Title: *Disability and Mothering: Liminal Spaces of Embodied Knowledge*

Editors: Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson and Jen Cellio

Publisher: Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011

Hardcover: \$39.95; as low as \$20 from external sellers listed on Amazon.com, 348 pages

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Reviewer: Carol J. Gill, Ph.D.

Margins, borders, and liminal spaces are the locations and recurrent themes of this book. They compose a geography of transitions and (forgive me) pregnant intersections that, according to editors Lewiecki-Wilson and Cellio, link disability and mothering. Both phenomena encompass dynamic interactions between personal and social, private and public, self and other. Although both mothering and disability are often perceived as matters of nature, the 21 essays in this collection support the editors' claim that there is no experience of the body without culture shaping that experience. It is an important idea, not only because it encapsulates so much of the knowledge conveyed in these essays but also because it give us hope that current arrangements could be changed ultimately to be more just and affirming of a broader range of humanity.

The book is an effort to expand the literature of feminist disability studies and to enhance the disability consciousness of feminism. Thus, the editors solicited contributions representing multiple disciplines and forms of activism, diverse experiences of mothering and disability (mothers with disabilities, mothers of children with disabilities, daughters of mothers with disabilities, and women considering or refusing motherhood in the context of disability), underrepresented perspectives, and various epistemological approaches (theoretical scholarship, personal narrative, social science research, literary criticism). The essays are grouped into five thematic clusters: 1) Reproductive Technologies in the Disciplining of Bodies, 2) Refusals: Contesting Diagnoses and Cultural Scripts, 3) Narrativity and Meaning-Making: Rewriting Stories of Mothering and Disability, 4) Reimagining Activism: A Politics of Disability and Mothering, and 5) Multiple Identities, Overlapping Borders.

The publisher's website recommends the book to:

“. . . Undergraduate and graduate students in women's studies and disability studies, to therapeutic and health care professionals, to anyone grappling with issues such as genetic testing and counseling, raising a child with a disability, or being disabled and contemplating starting a family”(Syracuse University Press).

To some extent, this volume offers something for all of those audiences. In terms of accessibility, most of the essays are written in a style that should be

comprehensible to most undergraduate students, but some essays and the introduction are more abstract and use terms, such as “trope,” “vexed,” and “overdetermined” that may be unfamiliar unless the reader has some background in critical analysis in the humanities. (Interestingly, the book is physically easier to handle than many books. It is structured to lay flat when opened and allows for fairly easy page turning. Moreover, its reasonable price makes it more economically accessible than many similar books.) Some readers will find the book heavy on discourse analysis and light on analysis of the daily political and economic issues confronting women who live at the intersection of mothering and disability. Others might be disappointed to find that mothers with disabilities are not the dominant voice.

Nonetheless, Lewiecki-Wilson and Cellio have assembled a valuable array of interesting, varied, and original essays that include personal stories, theoretical work, historical writing, diary entries, cultural commentary, and even research reports that convey both the voices of women with disabilities and social analysis of their experiences. I was particularly impressed and stimulated by the editors’ introduction and their call for an interactive conversation from multiple perspectives that they refer to as “contrapuntal dialogue” (p. 11), and I appreciated the opportunity to learn from experiences and standpoints that are severely underrepresented, such as the struggles of mothers at the intersection of disability and immigration policies (by Denise Cordella Hughes-Tafen) and poverty (by Shawn Cassiman). I was struck by the creativity, eloquence, and power of many essays, such as Rachel Robertson’s beautiful account of developing cultural respect for her autistic son, Ben, in the essay titled “Sharing stories: motherhood, autism, and culture.”

In a way, the multiplicity of viewpoints and approaches represented in this collection is double-edged. On the one hand, the pieces are so wide-ranging, it seems difficult to relate them to each other, even when they overlap in content. I found myself looking to the editors to tie some of the strands together in their final chapter but, instead, they offer an annotated list of keywords that avoids defining the terms but rather links them to particular essays, supposedly for further illumination. This conceptual treasure hunt map, though interesting, was unsatisfying as the last word.

On the other hand, the diversity of work presented in the book offers each of us an opportunity to interpret and integrate the essays or parts of them in unique ways that address our particular interests, that raise questions or convey knowledge that is fresh, or that offer new documentation of familiar ideas that we use in our scholarly and activist work. For example, I discovered useful information in unexpected places in these essays and was able to identify themes and questions across essays that might differ from those identified by the editors or the authors themselves. After reading these essays, we are left to apply our own lens to them to determine what they have to say to each other and to us. That seems to be the unavoidable heavy lifting of “contrapuntal dialogue.”

Reference

Syracuse University Press. Book description. Retrieved from
<http://syracuseuniversitypress.syr.edu/fall-2011/disability-mothering.html>.

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