Book Review:  
*Disability and Mothering: Liminal Spaces of Embodied Knowledge*  
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In *Disability and Mothering: Liminal Spaces of Embodied Knowledge*, Lewiecki-Wilson and Cellio provide an intriguing collection of twenty-one essays by new and established scholars and community activists. Each of these essays explores the overlaps and tensions of disability and mothering in the context of subject positions and liminal spaces where liminal refers to an in-between state of being, the complex and often confusing space where the personal and social collide. As the editors state, this particular focus is unique in that *Disability and Mothering* is the first book to examine the underrepresented and undertheorized intersection of disability and mothering both personally and culturally (3). The authors investigate issues of persuasion, politics, and power in the context of medicine, technology, gender, and the body.

By providing twenty-one essays, each by different authors, the editors highlight the breadth of issues that accompanies disability studies. Readers looking for a more detailed discussion of the history of disability studies, however, may want to look elsewhere. Likewise, those looking for a history and/or overview of feminist studies may find other collections more instructive.

**Editors’ Introduction**

In the introduction of the book, the editors define *disability* and *mothering*. Both are defined by the editors as an experience but not as a single type of experience. Rather, these are “embodied, situated, and social” (3) experiences. By this, the editors mean that both disability and mothering are experienced personally and socially at a local level as well as at a broad, cultural level. Lewiecki-Wilson and Cellio also explain that this combination of experiences is constituted by a flux of relations among bodies, practices, and institutions (3). Finally, the editors argue that neither mothering nor disability should be understood as a fixed identity but rather as multiple, overlapping, and sometimes contradicting identities that exist simultaneously (3).

As an introduction to the collection’s essays, Lewiecki-Wilson and Cellio offer a brief overview of queer theory, feminism, and disability studies by discussing a few models of analysis (e.g., populist and social models of disability, phenomenology, etc.) that have been commonly used to explore disability, mothering, and related topics. The authors then divide the book into five sections. The sections are organized not by particular disabilities (objects) or research approaches (methods) but rather “according to the direction of cultural forces flowing into bodies and shaping
personal experience and [according to] the reverse, flowing from personal engagement and resistance outward to remake culture,” as the section titles suggest (14).

The following sections are organized according to the five parts of the book. I begin each section by listing the essay titles and authors included in each section.

**Part 1: Reproductive Technologies in the Disciplining of Bodies**

- “‘Healthy, Accomplished, and Attractive’: Visual Representations of ‘Fitness’ in Egg Donors” by Jen Cellio
- “Negotiating Discourses of Maternal Responsibility, Disability, and Reprogenetics: The Role of Experiential Knowledge” by Felicity Boardman
- “Stalking Grendel’s Mother: Biomedicine and the Disciplining of the Deviant Body” by Terri Beth Miller
- “Uneasy Subjects: Disability, Feminism, and Abortion” by Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson

The book’s first section focuses on how technologies and discourses shape and reshape bodies by, for example, defining and creating boundaries that influence our understanding of health and fitness. In addition, the essays provide specific examples in which these definitions are acted out in our everyday behavior and actions. The authors directly question and challenge what Steven Katz refers to as “expediency” in disability technologies and discourses (197). They do so by writing about the ways in which discourses and technologies reshape the disabled body, women’s roles as mothers, and the female subject. In doing so, these authors remind readers that expediency must be avoided, especially when it comes to technology and disability since technologies may lead to forms of eugenics wherein potentially harmful boundaries are created for what are considered normal bodies. This idea is demonstrated particularly well in Miller’s essay, which presents a Foucauldian analysis of prenatal screening and diagnosis. Miller argues that prenatal screening, diagnoses, and treatment are disciplinary practices that attempt to regulate bodies or make “potentially deviant bodies docile through remediation or extermination, reifying an image of ‘normal’ society…” (50). Like Miller, the other authors in this section emphasize the regulatory nature of similar kinds of practices and discourses.

**Part 2: Refusals: Contesting Diagnoses and Cultural Scripts**

- “‘What Does it Matter?: A Mediation on the Social Positioning of Disability and Mothering” by Samantha Walsh
- “Reconceiving Motherhood” by Kristin Lindgren
- “Refusing Diagnosis: Mother-daughter Agency in Confronting Psychiatric Rhetoric” by Abby Wilkerson
- “Diagnosable: Mothering at the Threshold of Disability” by Julia Miele Rodas

The second section, Refusals: Contesting Diagnoses and Cultural Scripts, centers on agency in resistance to stock stories and/or cultural scripts that separate disability from mothering by (a) providing a course of action for whom and how one should mother and (b) portraying disabled
bodies as abnormal, dependent, and unacceptable for mothering. The authors emphasize the readers’ and subjects’ power to resist these stories. Through essays like Walsh’s, which resists biases against mothering with a disability by drawing upon the idea of able-bodiedness (85) (whereas others in this section draw upon ideas of strength and the right to choose), readers begin to understand what is meant by the notions of agency and resistance; moreover, the essays in this section help readers to think about specific ways they can begin to resist cultural scripts. Lindgren, for example, writes about how she personally reconceived motherhood and found an alternative way of parenting after she was diagnosed with a chronic physical illness. Lindgren figured out a way to balance the needs of her family with her own needs when motherhood involved both giving and receiving care (95). Just as Lindgren draws upon the notion of strength and uses that strength to resist cultural scripts, the other authors in this section describe similar experiences.

Part 3: Narrativity and Meaning-making: Rewriting Stories of Mothering and Disability

- “Mothers as Storytellers” by Linnea E. Franits
- “Sharing Stories: Motherhood, Autism, and Culture” by Rachel Robertson
- “Nurturing the Nurturer: Reflections on an Experience of Breastfeeding, Disability, and Physical Trauma” by Heather Kuttai
- “Vulnerable Subjects: Motherhood and Disability in Nancy Mairs and Cherrie Moraga” by Suzanne Bost
Part 4: Reimagining Activism: A Politics of Disability and Mothering

- “From Surrender to Activism: The Transformation of Disability and Mothering at Kew Cottages, Australia” by Corinne Manning
- “History Examined: One Woman’s Story of Disability and Advocacy” by Marilyn Dolmage
- “My Mother’s Mental Illness” by Whitney Jones-Garcia
- “A Schizo-ly Situated Daughter: A Mother’s Labor” by Elizabeth Metcalf
- “Motherhood and Activism in the Dis/Enabling Context of War: The Case of Cindy Sheehan” by Abby M. Dubisar

The fourth section emphasizes awareness as well as the history and complexity of activist practices. This section, which focuses more specifically on the experiences of those who care for people with disabilities, highlights the tensions that exist within activism. Some of these tensions include mothering a child who has been admitted to state care, inclusion and institutionalization of a disabled person, and issues of equality. Metcalf’s essay helps to further explain the complexity of activism by describing the various roles of a person caring for someone with a disability. Metcalf explains that her mother, in caring for Metcalf, acted as a case manager, counselor, physical therapist, security guard, cruise director, and senior attending physician, depending on the situation (219-220). Like Metcalf’s essay, each of the essays in this section describes the overwhelming and complex nature of committed action by those caring for people with disabilities.

Part 5: Multiple Identities, Overlapping Borders

- “The Political is Personal: Mothering at the Intersection of Acquired Disability, Gender, and Race” by Julie E. Maybee
- “‘You Gotta Make Aztlan Any Way You Can’: Disability in Cherrie Moraga’s Heroes and Saints” by Julie Avril Minich
- “Intersecting Postcolonial Mothering and Disability: A Narrative of an Antiguan Mother and Her Son” by Denise Cordella Hughes-Tafen
- “Mothering, Disability, and Poverty: Straddling Borders, Shifting Boundaries, and Everyday Resistance” by Shawn A. Cassiman

The book’s fifth section spotlights the complex nature of identity and especially of multiple, overlapping identities, which can be complementary and contradictory. The essays in this section help readers understand the overlap of being a mother with a disability or of being a mother with a child with a disability (or something similar). For example, Hughes-Tafen’s essay describes how mothering a disabled child affects a woman’s position as a woman as well as how a woman’s position as a woman impacts her choices in mothering a disabled child (284). This section does not offer readers familiar with identity as a scholarly concept anything new about identity. The section does, however, contextualize the idea of multiple identities as existing in the liminal space where disability and mothering come together, which is new.

Concluding Remarks

With the goals of encouraging readers to better understand the social practices in which they participate, the
complex nature of that participation, and the effects of that participation, Lewiecki-Wilson and Cellio provide a book with many possibilities for uses both academic and professional. Academically, this book serves as a useful learning tool for undergraduate and graduate students. The book is also useful for researchers in a variety of disciplines including but not limited to rhetoric studies, composition studies, communication studies, women and gender studies, disability studies, health studies, anthropology, and sociology. It opens up a space for added research and reading that may extend the voices in feminist and disability studies and, more broadly, in feminist and disability discourses. Specifically, the book increases readers’ understanding of the recursive relationship between themselves as social agents and the structural properties (including the psychological, social, and material consequences) of the cultural practices of which they are a part. Second, the essays in this book may provide a supplement for lessons on knowledge construction, agency and resistance, activism, and identity; this book also offers a pedagogical basis for discussion and debate about research methodologies and ethics. Due to the advanced nature of these issues, the latter discussion is best suited for students in graduate courses. Graduate instructors may use the essays in the book to demonstrate how students (in the students’ own research) may rewrite history and cultural scripts and/or write counter narratives.

While best suited for academic endeavors, *Disability and Mothering* also offers insight for professionals in technical communication, healthcare, and other areas of the humanities. This book will be helpful for technical communicators involved with usability testing and user-centered design because the essays provide an increased understanding of users and texts in the context of disability and mothering. That is, these essays may help professionals reimagine ways of living with different constraints so that product design and development reflect a high level of sensitivity to these kinds of lived experiences. In addition, *Disability and Mothering* may help professionals to more effectively consider the ethical implications of the discursive and technological products they create or improve as well as the ethical implications of client requests. Similarly, this book may assist healthcare professionals to better help patients by fostering sensitivity to the lived experiences of those with disabilities and those who care for those with disabilities.

The editors and authors effectively emphasize the importance of understanding the social practices in which readers participate, the effects of that participation, and the possibility for social change. Additionally, Lewiecki-Wilson and Cellio present notions of knowledge construction, agency and resistance, narrativity and counter narrativity, social activism, and multiple identities. Though these concepts are not new, the liminal space where disability and mothering come together, the context in which these concepts are presented, is new. This new approach supports a broader notion that a study of liminal spaces, like the one between disability and mothering, allows for continued transformation and growth of knowledge.

In sum, Lewiecki-Wilson and Cellio’s book offers a selection of essays that provides...
a nuanced understanding of feminist rhetorics and disability studies as two dynamic, overlapping fields. Additionally, by compiling a rich multitude of voices, this book marks a middle ground between rhetorical traditions and interdisciplinary impulses for the discipline of technical communication and rhetoric. Disability and Mothering: Liminal Spaces of Embodied Knowledge provides a starting point for those who are interested in learning more about and promoting social equity in their academic and professional endeavors.
Endnotes

1. The authors of the collection use a variety of methodologies to approach the subject of disability (and mothering). For example, Cellio uses visual and rhetorical analysis (see page 19), Boardman analyzes case studies (see page 34), and Minich rereads a play through a disability studies lens (see page 260).

Work Cited


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