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Review: Both Sides of the Table: Autoethnographies of Educators Learning and Teaching With/In [Dis]ability by Phil Smith

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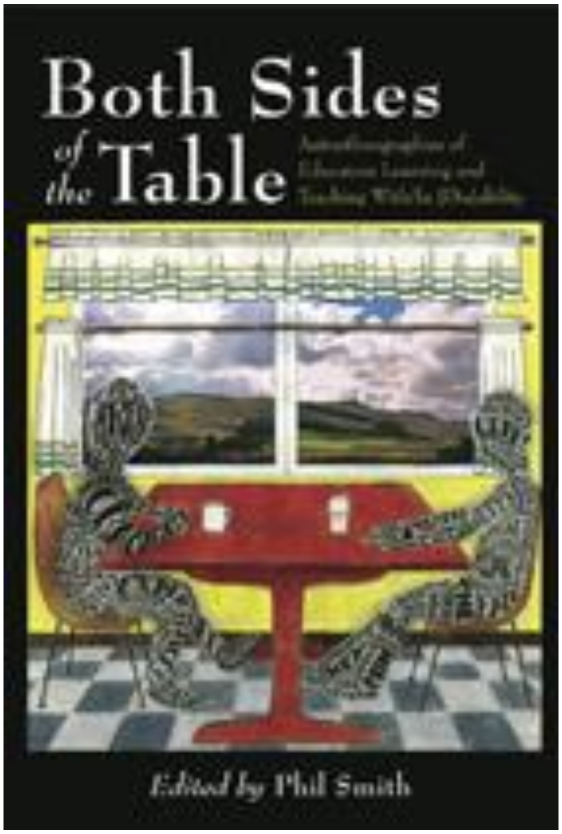

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Both Sides of the Table: Autoethnographies of Educators Learning and Teaching With/In [Dis]ability by Phil Smith (Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2014)

In Phil Smith's anthology *Both Sides of the Table: Autoethnographies of Educators Learning and Teaching With/In [Dis]ability*, twelve education scholars recount the experience of disability in their lives and those of their families. Smith's goal is to challenge conventional approaches to education and disability by presenting a wide range of autoethnographies, creative memoirs that seek to locate the self within and against its surrounding culture. The narratives challenge the expert wisdom of educational, legal, and medical bureaucracies; they offer, or encourage us to imagine, alternatives to conventional relationships between doctor and patient, teacher and student, or service provider and client. Their settings range far beyond the classroom to encompass many realms in which the scholars have dealt with disability in their lives and those of their families and students – the book's scenes span hospitals, jail, kitchens, swimming pools, departments of social services, literal and figurative closets, and the streets of 1980s Portland.

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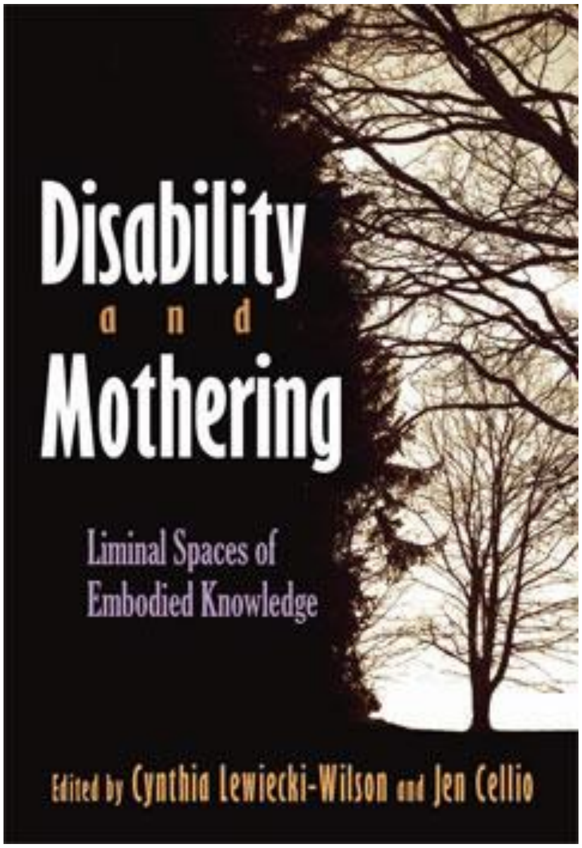
Despite the anthology's focus on the field of education and the personal narrative, Smith's contributors cover an immense range of perspectives. U.S. graduate student Dené Granger writes of her struggles with ableism, class oppression, and the pressures of diagnoses and disability disclosure, offering a powerful critique of "the myth of meritocracy." New Zealand scholar Bernadette Macartney paints a disconcerting picture of the contrast between her daughter's creative and ebullient personality as perceived by her family and the endless disappointments the child experiences in an educational system supposedly designed to accommodate her. City University of New York professor David J. Connor writes conscientiously and movingly about the role disability plays in his large British family, dramatizing the tension between working-class and professional values and modeling how he prompts his students to reflect on who has shaped their understanding of disability. All the contributions argue, implicitly or directly, that disability justice requires respect for personal experience, dialogue among the disabled and those affected by their loved ones' disability, and a radical re-envisioning of the relationship between professionals and laypersons.

Both Sides of the Table promises to use the openness of personal narrative — its resistance to quantification, categorization, and reductivism — to combat the oppressiveness of expert wisdom and discourses that objectify disabled people. The risks inherent in such a project are that the narratives will reproduce the hierarchies they hope to contest. No one, after all, invents a completely novel account of their personal experience: we use narratives that are already present in the discourse to make sense of what we live through. In particular when one criticizes professional training, the temptation is to create a narrative that culminates in self-congratulation and complacency, so that one can celebrate having humanized the profession when one has in fact reinscribed its authority. The fields of Medical Humanities and Narrative Medicine, for example, try hard to make medical students compassionate and critical; but sometimes their work reinforces the professional/layperson binary, enabling physicians to see themselves as possessing one more set of professional skills, with which they can frame patients as heartwarming objects of their benevolence. What mitigates the risk of these narratives being assimilated into existing power dynamics is the range and openness of the contributions to Smith's anthology: each is in a very different style, and most strive to be open to interpretation — as Elizabeth Grace's elegant "Autistethnography" puts it, "Maybe the reader can make inferences."

The book's range of perspectives also challenges any tendency to draw pat or comforting conclusions from its narratives.

The book's range of perspectives also challenges any tendency to draw pat or comforting conclusions from its narratives. The title, *Both Sides of the Table*, refers to the table at which educators and parents negotiate an Individualized Education Plan for disabled students; but given that the book gives voice to disabled scholars and students, parents with disabled children, children of disabled parents, university educators, K-12 educators, special ed teachers, and disability scholars, that table's got to be at least an octagon: the book renders it impossible to disentangle all those identities and turn the stories into parables of how We should deal with Them. The diversity of genre and tone among its contents is another of the book's many strengths. Michael Peacock's "The Bad Apple" is a lengthy poem that dramatizes his life as a gay American man with bipolar disorder, citing entomology, myth, musical theatre, and history to render his struggles and what he hopes to bring from them to the classroom. Erin McCloskey's "An Open Letter to Wyatt" is, like Macartney's piece, an account of a mother dealing with the educational system's treatment of her disabled child. McCloskey explains how her own experiences as a special educator led her to resist labeling students and to resist the school's pressure to classify her child as autistic. Liz McCall begins her beautifully-written and grueling "A New Chance to Matter" with her first experiences teaching in a special ed classroom and then recounts how her commitment to that field, and her conviction that she's the right person to be there for "difficult" students, has roots in her solitary battle to get the system to care about her father's psychoses. Ultimately, both the bleaker and the more joyful essays remain open-ended: the emphasis on the personal never turns them into cheery tales of therapeutic individualism .

One of the book's great successes is that its contents exceed the claims Smith makes for them in his introductory and concluding chapters — as he implies when he argues that the "identity" that autoethnographies present is innately too elusive to pin down. Smith hopes to redefine educational research in ways that attend to the voice of its "subjects"; he aspires to criticize scientism and the Enlightenment-based mission of the educational system, with its need to categorize and judge everyone it can absorb. The book does both well. And it also addresses issues of gender — the majority of the authors are women, and the most dramatic indictments of the system are tales of women interacting with unyielding authority figures on behalf of their parents or children. It also raises questions about the social model of disability: that model's claim to foreground the subjectivity of disabled people is tested when a mother makes decisions on how to represent her developmentally disabled child or a daughter her terminally ill father. Indeed, Connor and McCloskey specifically address their concern about whether their representations of their family are just. The contributors' sensitive and provocative approaches result in a book that exceeds the sum of its parts.



As a scholarly source and a classroom resource, *Both Sides of the Table* could be put into dialogue with other disability studies texts that emphasize parenting or educational institutions, such as Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson and Jen Cellio's anthology, *Disability and Mothering: Liminal Spaces of Embodied Knowledge* or Margaret Price's *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life*. The experiences and arguments it presents deserve attention well beyond the walls of education colleges.