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Tanja Reiffenrath. *Memoirs of Well-Being: Rewriting Discourses of Illness and Disability.* Body Cultures Series. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2016. 321 pp. $45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-8376-3546-1.

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Following the lead of scholars like Thomas Couser and Arthur Frank, Tanja Reiffenrath focuses her study on the twentieth- and twenty-first-century illness and disability memoir as a unique genre that marks a âcrucial change in the demographics and body politics of life writing in the United Statesâ (p. 11). For Reiffenrath, these memoirs respond to a new social need, emerging since the 1980s, for a narrative form that not only represents and narrates the experience of illness and disability but also resists and revises biomedicineâs linear narrative of diagnosis, treatment, and recovery. Such memoirsâ political power is in their ability to âblur the boundaries between health and illness/disabilityâ as opposed to reifying them as stable categories with health as the necessary telos of any life narrative (p. 14). Rather than fetishize the loss of health and the desperate return to health as always a desired state of being, these memoirists reimagine what âwell-beingâ might look like outside of a curative model that can only define health as the absence of disease.

Reiffenrathâs archive, as she describes it, is âselective rather than exclusiveâ: literary memoirs of well-being typically by professional, established intellectuals (p. 18). She explicitly excludes ârelational narrativesâ (those written by relatives about other family members) and narratives by non-academics or first-time writers. While acknowledging the particular privilege of these authors to write, market, and sell their respective memoirs in the first place, Reiffenrath focuses on the works of Audre Lorde, Oliver Sacks, Simi Linton, Kenny Fries, and Siri Hustvedt to highlight the pervasiveness of the âmemoir of well-beingâ genre as one that encompasses many highly canonical texts, as well to connect her work to âcurrent discourses in the disciplines of American Studies, memoir studies, and Disability Studiesâ (p. 19). This strategy, while missing out on the possibility of excavating a history of the âmemoir of well-beingâ âfrom below,â allows her to demonstrate how such highly visible memoirs help to âdestigmatize disease and impairment and encourage alternative and embodied visions of well-beingâ through an explicit politicization of their authorsâ bodily conditions (p. 26). Reiffenrathâs choice of first-person academic memoirs consistently underscores how their authors do not disavow illness or disability but make their patienthood, their deeply personal incapacity, political; the writers do not simply pass as healthy or, to put it in Susan Sontagâs words in *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), as happily returned to âthe kingdom of the wellâ (p. 3).

The book moves from a discussion of its theoretical and methodological framework to a set of âcase studies.â Reappropriating the genre of the medical case study, Reiffenrath demonstrates through her close readings of five different âmemoirs of well-beingâ how their experiences of illness and disability exceed the biomedical frameworks that try to contain them. The case study, itself a historical genre of medical writing, was notoriously dependent on narrative conventions like figurative language. Reiffenrath recuperates this connection by emphasizing how the writers in her study engage both lay and scientific understandings of illness and disease; the impulse to establish a âclearâ line between subjective and objective understanding of illness and disability becomes impossible (if not entirely beside the point) when both contribute to the writersâ identities

as ill and disabled individuals. Rather than entirely disentangling themselves from the medical discourses that first gave meaning to their respective conditions, writers like Lorde and Sacks return to the traumatic encounters with medical practitioners to challenge a clichÃ©d triumph narrative that must end with curative resolution. Like Eli Clareâs recent book, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (2017), Reiffenrathâs study focuses on how an often-marginalized patient voice becomes disempowered by biomedicineâs claims to âknowâ ill and disabled bodies and then ultimately cure them. Instead, these writers highlight the âuncertaintyâ and âcontingencyâ of medicineâs objectifying and dehumanizing positivism (p. 288). What unifies these works under the subgenre of âmemoirs of well-beingâ is their capacity to draw on embodied experiences of illness and disability to develop their own ways of knowing the world, what Robert McRuer has provocatively called âcripistemology,â to resist the hegemony of the curative paradigm that dominates Western culture (*Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* [2006]).

Particularly striking is Reiffenrathâs attention to the place of community in these âmemoirs of well-being.â Lorde and Linton use narrative to connect themselves to both real and âalternative imagined communit[ies]ââa powerful act of identification that underscores how the personal, particularly for ill and disabled people, is always political (p. 285). The singular âIâ in the memoirs Reiffenrath explores is recognized, echoed, and amplified by others beyond the narrativeâs boundaries: âillness and disability not only cease to be linked to isolation, but these experiences also assume great momentousnessâ (p. 285). The âmomentousnessâ is the oscillation between the singular and the collective, which counterintuitively runs against the assumption that memoir is the genre of narrow individual experience. Reiffenrath ultimately argues that the authors in their âmemoirs of well-beingâ self-disclose as a powerful gesture of solidarity with a larger âremission societyâ that is underacknowledged. This important conclusion could have linked up excitingly with recent scholarship in disability studies about interdependence and the politics of care. These authors find kinship not only with fellow ill and disabled people but also with able-bodied individuals who might be their caretakers or their allies.

Reiffenrathâs book is a timely addition to the growing body of scholarship on illness and disability life writing. While written for those more familiar within these fields, the bookâs introduction and opening chapters survey key theoretical frameworks in the philosophy of medicine and disability studies in a form accessible for nonspecialists. Yet, in her desire to situate herself in relation to older work on memoir and illness and disability studies, her arguments at times get buried beneath frequent references to the work of other scholars. Reiffenrathâs revision of her dissertation into book form could have more strongly foregrounded her many important interventions into how these memoirists are âmore than âwounded storytellersââ (p. 294).

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