Review of An Arts-Based Inquiry of Sibling Disability: Stealing from My Sister's Plate by Linnea Franits (2025)

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Non-disabled writers whose lives and identities are informed by their relationship to disability, such as family members and romantic partners, inhabit a liminal position, which Linnea Franits terms "disability wise," drawing on Goffman. However, while this close proximity has the potential to engender a nuanced experiential knowledge of disability beyond familiar ablist tropes, it is complicated not only by those same tropes but also by the frictions of familial and social expectations. Franits' book, *An Arts-Based Inquiry of Sibling Disability: Stealing from My Sister's Plate* explores these tensions through an analysis of creative works by non-disabled siblings and the author's own arts-based autoethnographic exploration of her relationship to her older sister and her disability.

Although trained as an occupational therapist, Franits approaches the topic of her sibling's disability with the tools of content analysis and arts-informed research. Franits does not directly explore her professional identity in relation to her sister, but she includes both occupational and domestic spaces in her artwork, suggesting that these boundaries are indeed both permeable and pertinent to her broader consideration of sibling identity formation in the context of disability. The book begins by analyzing a selection of creative works produced by the non-disabled siblings of people with a variety of disabilities, including both written and graphic memoirs as well as visual arts such as film,

photography, and mixed media artwork. This narrative and thematic analysis explores how non-disabled siblings represent not only their disabled kin, but also other family relationships and their own identities. In the second half of the book, the author uses creative practices including photographic manipulation and assemblage along with autoethnographic reflection as a means of generating insights into her own identity formation in relation to her sister throughout their lives.

For non-disabled parents of disabled children, disability often appears as a rupture in an otherwise normative life path, but for siblings, the experience of disability permeates social development and informs identity formation, often from a very young age. As Franits points out, this unique perspective can be viewed as a privilege, enabling non-disabled siblings to develop an insider's knowledge of their sibling's disability, but it also presents significant ethical challenges in discerning which parts of that story are theirs to tell and which are not. Although the siblings of disabled people have an insider view of the enormous variability of everyday disabled life – from the joys of sibling intimacies to the heavy material and emotional costs of ablism for families – they remain outsiders to the experience of being disabled. As Franits' reading of sibling memoirs and art-making shows, this literal and metaphorical *familiarity* has the potential to produce a heightened awareness of how disability and ablism shape family dynamics, including non-disabled siblings' own identity. However, it can just as easily result in strong resentments and internalized anxieties about disability, which become especially evident when adult siblings consider the possibility of producing disabled children. This eugenic impulse,

common to many of the memoirs Franits reviews, underscores the urgent necessity of separating the challenges of ablism from families’ lived experiences of disability.

Franits’ work demonstrates the need for more nuanced accounts of how non-disabled family members construct identities alongside their disabled kin. A core tension throughout the book is the negotiation of an identity that is both separate from her sister and also fundamentally constructed in and through that relationship. Indeed, struggles to delineate and respect the boundaries of her sister’s identity and story are not just a question of research ethics, they are at the core of the research itself. The strongest elements of the book emerge in the author’s attempts to make sense of a complex and evolving role that is not fully or accurately captured by traditional kinship terms like “little sister,” but for which few alternatives exist. Combining Garvin’s formulation of “big little sister” with the Haudenosaunee agricultural practice of “three sisters,” Franits suggests possibilities for exploring kinship roles not as fixed constellations but rather as mutable, multiple, and fundamentally interdependent.

The book is based on the author’s dissertation and unfortunately it retains much of the awkwardness common to the genre; a more integrated discussion of the author’s creative research practices with those of other siblings would have helped to situate the book’s argument more clearly within its methodological and theoretical frameworks. Nevertheless, the book contributes to an underdeveloped area of research, raising a number of salient questions and avenues for future exploration. Critically, it makes clear the necessity of creative and inventive approaches to making sense of relationships that defy and exceed given social vocabularies of kinship and narrative tropes of disability, while

laying the groundwork for future inquiry. If siblings’ complex feelings and relationships with their disabled siblings reflect both the challenges of ablism and the joys of knowing bodies otherwise, how might this wisdom inform critical explorations of disability intimacy, interdependence, and care? What might disabled siblingship look like in a more accessible world?

Critical approaches to disability studies suggest that conceptualizing disability and illness merely as deviation from social and biomedical norms of how bodies and minds ought to function not only neglects the social structures that exclude, diminish, and oppress disabled people, it also impoverishes our ability to make sense of how society and social roles are constructed in relation to those norms. In this sense, while the field rightly centers the lived experiences of disabled people themselves and continues to explore alternative forms of disabled kinship, it may also benefit from more careful exploration of the relational construction of disabled and non-disabled identities within traditional family structures. *Stealing from my sister’s plate* suggests that a more nuanced critical understanding of how disability and ablism transform families, beyond tired tropes of disabled loved ones as burdens or lessons, might also help us to imagine more expansive and emancipatory visions of kinship, community, and care.