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Millett-Gallant, A. (2013). *Re-Membering: Putting Mind and Body Back Together Following Traumatic Brain Injury*. Createspace. ISBN 978-1490524733.

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Re-Membering: Putting Mind and Body Back Together Following Traumatic Brain Injury is an interesting, sensitive, and thoughtful volume that will appeal to those interested in the power of disability to shape art in new and profound ways. This slim four-chapter book, written as a series of essays with illustrations, would be of interest to art students seeking to explore disability representation in the setting of a still relatively novel genre. *Re-Membering* would also be useful to undergraduate students interested in learning something new at the intersections of disability, impairment, art, medicine, and culture.

A woman who occupies many social locations at once, Millett-Gallant is a university instructor, an artist, a theorist, and a writer. She is a wife and a daughter. She is also self-described as a congenital amputee from birth, and thus a woman with disabilities. The focus of this book, however, is on the outcome of an accident she experienced *as a disabled woman*, one that resulted in her acquiring life threatening impairments, including impairments involving both her brain and her skull.

The title of this book and the jacket are eye catching. The clever and *à propos* double entendre “re-membering” sits above a striking collage. The latter was created, states Millett-Gallant, “by accident,” another double entendre given the subject matter of her book. Reading inside the covers, one learns that after her accident, Millett-Gallant experienced her consciousness as a collage. She explains that art gave her a medium to channel her confusion and desperation during this period. She also notes that, when

considering her accident, and which art forms would suit her best, she “felt intuitively that collage was the optimal medium, since my feelings and memories were already fragmented and existed in diverse remnants of visual culture, photographs, drawings and get well cards” (93). It turns out she made a good choice, as she subsequently experienced the collage as a mode of healing, and this discovery ultimately formed the basis of her book: a work about art and healing.

Re-Membering is a memoir offering narrative, excerpts, reproductions of her art, as well as interesting medical information and commentary. Where the narrative portion is concerned, it is a curious memoir; while it focuses on traditional memoir writing strategies such as recollections and reminiscences, the work paradoxically also focuses on gaps in the author’s memory and her inability to remember, which are often prominent features of brain injury. She describes her thought processes and memories as being fragmented (and thus collage-like) (45). She notes that her efforts to regain her memories invoked in her both fear and fascination. She could no longer discern the passage of time or what her favourite item was on a menu at her favourite restaurant. Her partner ordered for her. She experienced flashbacks of sudden onset. Images that came to her were vivid and felt recent. She states of herself that she “strategically erased” her memory of the accident as a means to protect herself (47).

Interesting to students, too, will be her commentary regarding literary contributions of others on insights likewise acquired through having impairments. Among those whose work she engages are Oliver Sacks, Claudia Osborne, Jill Bolte Taylor, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. In keeping with works by these authors, Millett-Gallant provides examples of the ways in which her own acquired impairments

have provided her with insight into disability (generally and her own). In one of her reflections, she comments that neurologist Oliver Sacks' personal experience with his own post-accident leg impairment greatly improved his ability to understand reasons why neurologists need to do away with mind-body dichotomizations in their work.

In this way, she illustrates the idea that one's own embodied knowledge of disability enhances and may inform a better understanding of disability not only for oneself, but for others as well. Some of her insights specifically deal with living with neurological impairments, as she has, as experience leading ultimately to her arriving at a different understanding of the complex nature, changeable quality, and shifting meaning of memory. This is perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the book, for it challenges the reader to consider not only their own memory and its potential limitations, but also to consider how memory relates to consciousness and, importantly for Millett-Gallant, identity.

The author also engages with the work of other disabled artists, including Joseph Grigely and Kevin Connolly (about whom she has written in the past—see Millett, 2008). However, it is Frida Kahlo who is her muse, and it is the work of Kahlo to which her narrative often returns. As a female artist who acquired impairments after an accident, Millett-Gallant relates to Kahlo's works exploring disabled female embodiment and experiences of physical trauma and its aftermath. Kahlo, she notes, was influenced by medical images, as is she. Millett-Gallant states at one point, regarding one of her own canvasses, that the "medical illustration objects in Kahlo's composition relate visually to my marker-coloured illustration of the anatomy of the knee" (118). Kahlo's image, like

her own, attempts to reconcile identity as a “victim of an accident,” as a patient, with other aspects of herself that are positive and lighthearted.

Further evidence of this connection with Kahlo’s work is apparent in Figure 2, entitled *Self-portrait with Hemicraniectomy*. The author here renders public her non-normative female figure. When questioning why one would do this, the obvious answer may be personal: the work is interesting, or therapeutic. However, Millett-Gallant’s work juxtaposed alongside Kahlo’s becomes a feminist project, where representations of the disabled female body are rooted in what the subject experiences. My favourite piece in the book is *Crippersize* (Fig. 7), which features a self-portrait of Millett-Gallant balancing her nude body across a Bosu balance trainer, performing fitness stretching while in physiotherapy. This piece reaches me on a personal level, and it is also politically powerful. Such self-portraits and the inclusion of photographs of herself as a child and as an adult in this memoir, are not to be confused with a desire on her part to be on display. On the contrary, she discusses ways she has dealt with the phenomenon many persons with disabilities experience—staring and eye-aversion. For example, she mentions that she often sports a Lady Gaga T-shirt emblazoned with the words “Born This Way” as a means of fending off what she refers to as “intrusions” into her privacy (86).

Throughout the book, Millett-Gallant engages the reader with a variety of visual works of art, which she uses to convey a new way of understanding neurological impairment, but uses them also as a pathway toward her own healing. Considering her experience of impairment through physical trauma, the author employs a CT scan of her skull taken prior to reconstruction by her neurologist, and makes it over into a painting. It

becomes *Pink Skull* (Fig. 5). She comments on this, stating that she perceived the re-creation of her skull by her trusted neurologist (formerly an art student) to be the act of a sculptor. In this way, she reimagines and reframes her own skull reconstruction as art. In a similar vein, in *Oceanic MRI*, (Fig. 4), four medical images of a scan taken of Millett-Gallant's injured brain are incorporated into a watercolor painting. Such works give one pause to consider, provocatively, that medical images formally representing pathology may be aesthetically interesting and pleasant to look upon. Perhaps this is the point. Her efforts here are in accord with disability aesthetics theorist, Tobin Siebers's (2010) observation that medical images have become an aesthetic genre in their own right. While the possibility exists for such works to appear macabre or to remain clinical, curiously they do not.

Throughout her four chapters, Millett-Gallant weaves the reasons for her artistic expression. It is clear she does not "do art" solely for the purposes of making images to hang on other people's walls. It is through art that she has been able confront the powerful embodied experience of having acquired significant impairments during her accident. It is through art that she manages to heal from a range of neurologically based bodily impairments, including her memory loss. It is through art that she is also able to deal with impactful experiences of mental flooding (becoming emotionally overwhelmed because of impaired brain mechanisms) which lead to her having experiences with anxiety and emotional distress. It is through art that she is able to regain her identity, which was something she explored as threatened by memory losses. It is through art that she finds her way back.

This explored embodied exercise in healing through creativity would offer students of disability an interesting pedagogical counterpoint to the social model of disability. While environment is clearly important to the author, it is subjectivity and affectivity in relation to brain injury that most capture her attention. This facet of the book, along with the art she shares, has much generative potential. One of the important messages in this book is that the experience of living with physical disabilities from birth provided the author with the tools she required to move through the emotional and physical impacts of a life-threatening physical trauma. Her insight is that her preexisting disability status and prior embodied knowledge conferred upon her the strength that enabled her to negotiate difficult challenges brought about by the accident. Her unique contribution ought not be overlooked.

References

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Siebers, T. (2010). *Disability Aesthetics*. University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor.

More of Millett-Gallant's artwork can be found online:

<https://www.facebook.com/remembering.millett.gallant>