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O'Toole, C. (2015). *Fading Scars: My Queer Disability History*. Fort Worth: Autonomous Press. ISBN 978-0-9861835-1-5.

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How will the next generation know how to fight back if we don't tell them what we did? How do we stop the violence unless we offer our own life stories as stepping stones? We've spent a lifetime learning, why wouldn't we pass on this valuable knowledge to the people coming behind us? This book exists because disabled people left their stories behind (276-277).

“Disability history,” as Corbett O'Toole appropriately notes, is “complicated, messy, and mostly invisible” (268). In *Fading Scars*, O'Toole does the important work of documenting, from her own situated lived experiences, different pivotal moments in the 40 years that deeply shaped American disability history. She points us to a series of often neglected topics within disability activism and research including the intersections of disability, race, and queerness. In such manner, *Fading Scars* delivers a compelling collection of 12 separate essays, which do not need to be read sequentially, addressing a multitude of topics that will certainly be useful and engaging to a variety of audiences.

The book's introductory essay, “Celebrating Crip Bodyminds,” not only accomplishes the usual task of introducing the topic of each chapter and clarifying the terminology used throughout the book, but also successfully sets the stage, especially for those outside disability circles, by challenging the reader to move beyond dominant narratives of disability, normalcy, and competence. This opening chapter also invites the reader into the author's personal journey and relationship to disability (in fact, the book consistently notes other movement actors' relation to disability).¹ O'Toole, who is disabled herself, is a well-known disability rights and justice

¹ See also: O'Toole's 2013 article *Disclosing Our Relationships to Disabilities: An Invitation for Disability Studies Scholars*, published in *Disability Studies Quarterly*.

activist and writer with an outstanding record of first-hand experience and participation in key moments of US disability history. Without a doubt, she is particularly well positioned to share insightful and important stories about the disability rights movement's history with us in this book. The introductory essay presents the central concept of "fading scars," which, as the author explains, reflect her experiences of "abuse" as well as "survival" that are "permanently intertwined," and that make up for "an interesting and challenging life not in spite of...scars, but in full acknowledgment of them" (47).

The essays "Flexing Power: San Francisco 504 Sit-In," "Center for Independent Living, Berkeley," "1975 Disability Studies: Hal Kirshbaum's Grand Experiment," and "From Berkeley to Beijing" take the reader through different moments of the disability rights movement in the United States. Importantly, these chapters highlight that these mobilizations were successful because, as O'Toole states, "we did *not* do it the nondisabled way," but rather, "our success came directly from the skills we'd learned in order to survive as disabled people" (67). This effectiveness of mobilizing in the "disabled way" is consistently illustrated throughout these chapters. For instance, during their sit-in in the San Francisco federal building in 1977, disability rights activists inside the building had their communication with the outside world cut off. They overcame that barrier, however, as activists on both sides of the building communicated through sign language via one of the windows. These essays not only take us inside the strategic processes of movement actors, but, most importantly, they share rich details about the imaginative, relational, and collaborative on-the-ground experiences of those involved in these efforts for personal and social change. Readers learn about the longest occupation of a federal building; the emergence of a new organization and philosophy called Independent Living in Berkeley, California, which claimed that disabled people should be in charge of all the decisions

in their lives; the development of the first Disability Studies program in the United States; and the impactful participation of disabled women in the 1995 United Nations' conference on women in Beijing, China. Throughout, O'Toole demonstrates the importance of humour in mobilization, shedding light on an often overlooked, and yet very relevant, aspect of activism. The book indeed demonstrates how “maintaining a sense of humor is critically important” (262), be it on a basketball court during a heated game, or a long and exhausting sit-in in a government building. Humour is important not only because it shows resilience, strategy, and creativity, but—most important, I think—because it has the potential to encourage bonding, trust, and solidarity.

I especially find this book to be compelling for its attention to intersectionality. The fifth essay “Race and Disability” examines the overlooked contributions of disabled people of colour within white-based disability rights organizations. While acknowledging the significant contributions that disability rights organizations have made, O'Toole importantly proposes that we engage in a self-critical type of work, taking the invisibility of disabled people of colour in disability history records as well as their exclusion from leadership positions more seriously. In the essay “Disability Queered,” O'Toole engages her readers with another important intersection, that of disability and queerness. The essay directs attention to the struggle to get the specific needs and concerns of queer disabled people recognized on the agenda of the disability rights movement. This particular essay exemplifies, to me, a form of “boundary-work”—meaning a group's effort to set symbolic boundaries in order to differentiate itself from other groups. The essay reveals, for instance, that in the 1980s, during the HIV/AIDS crisis, the disability rights movement at Berkeley did little to support individuals with HIV/AIDS and in doing so established boundaries between who should and should not be supported. The concept of

symbolic boundaries may be useful for further unpacking historical and current strategies and alliances of disability rights organizations (see Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

In the two essays—respectively titled “Dancing Through Life” and “Court Crips”—the author recognizes the roles of representation, dance, and sports in potentially expanding dominant notions of body-mind. In “Dancing Through Life,” we read an important critique of dominant representations of disabled people as either “an aberration, an inspiration, or a villain” (136), which, ever so pervasive, even pop up every once in a while in our Facebook timelines. Moreover, though, we get to enthusiastically imagine ourselves with O'Toole throughout the dance floor, desiring like her to have more spaces to fully and freely express ourselves. “Court Crips” then turns to the role of sports and competition for disabled athletes. O'Toole makes the point that sometimes ableist, stereotypical, and paternalistic understandings of disability make it likely that people outside the court “do not see our athleticism, our finely honed skills practiced over many hours and even years” (159). However, as athletes, she emphasizes, the aim is rather to “kick ass” and “take no crap off the court” while “treat[ing] each other as athletes because that is what we are, whether the people watching us play can see that or not” (160).

In “Violence Against Disabled People,” a heartbreaking but nonetheless important read, O'Toole discusses the issue of violence against disabled people with nuance and sensitivity. She shows, using a significant amount of statistical data as well as case studies, that the abuse against people with disabilities is systematic, penetrating various social institutions (including medical settings, institutions, and prisons) and spheres of everyday life. Can we revert this scenario? Yes, but this requires—the author convincingly argues—not only greater “community accountability” on a local level, but also that we start asking the “right questions” (185).

I particularly enjoyed the next two essays—respectively titled “Welcome to India: Parenting Disabled Children” and “Disabled Parents”—which explore the topic of parenting from the positions of parents with disabled children as well as parents with disabilities. Sexuality, reproduction, and parenting remain areas of particular social control in the lives of disabled people. It has been documented that people with disabilities face a series of obstacles to being sexual, becoming parents, and maintaining custody of their children, and, certainly, images of parents with disabilities remain sporadic. O'Toole, however, takes an important step further to focus on “the ways in which being a disabled parent offers both children and society new resources and ideas” (251). This showcasing is a welcome addition because it is critical to also talk about the “positives,” as scholarly work often overlooks positive experiences and unique resources of parents with disabilities. Nevertheless, there is still a lot of work to be done in terms of addressing the various structural and attitudinal barriers that prevent many from being parents and forming families.

In “Dancing Forward,” the book’s final essay, O'Toole reminds us of the exciting and important work that still needs to be done with regard to capturing more histories, and she calls for a reflexive effort on the part of disability rights organizations as she asks: “who do we want to be?” (270). I agree with her that there remains undoubtedly many stories to be told, shared, and preserved. It is equally important for us, here in Canada, to share this commitment to preserve our own disability history. Not only that, a consistent theme throughout this book is the importance of a more intersectional approach that recognizes multiple axes of inequalities and makes space for accounts that have been overlooked in disability history, including those from disabled people of colour, queer disabled people, and those who do not conform to “pretty” (271) representations of disability. As O'Toole states, “[t]o date, disability rights organizations have

saved the stories of mostly white disabled people, especially people with physical disabilities. It is important to save more stories” (268). This book may “ruffle feathers” (270) as the author notes; however, this may be perhaps an important push for future disability activism and organizing.

This is an important book. I applaud the author’s effort to make the text as accessible as possible and we should certainly take notes from O’Toole’s writing style. For instance, each chapter contains both a brief summary at the beginning as well as a “just the facts ma’am” section at the end providing straightforward and easy-to-read outlines. The book is clearly written and engaging for a range of readers, including both those in and outside disability circles. Scholars in disability studies, sociology, sexuality studies, gender studies, just to mention a few, will surely appreciate it. *Fading Scars* also makes a contribution to the study of social movements by providing important insights about the mobilization of resources, employment of unique strategies, and use of creativity and humour in disability activism. Above all, *Fading Scars* is a thoughtful and timely piece that reminds us that there is a lot to learn from the past, and indeed, a lot more stories to learn from.

References

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