BOOK REVIEWS

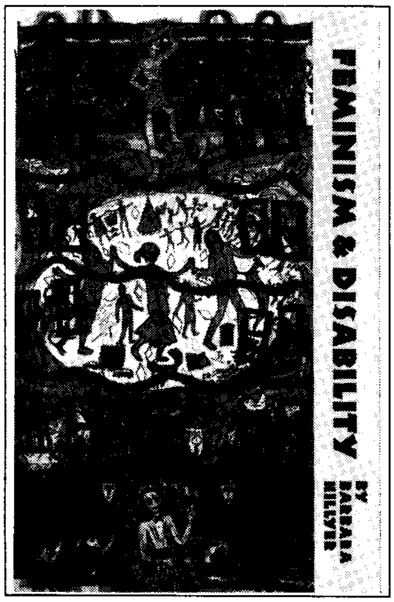
FEMINISM & DISABILITY

Barbara Hillyer. Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993.

by Shelley Tremain

As a feminist graduate student attempting to theorize ableism and disablement, I am keenly aware of the dearth of critical academic work done under the rubric of the "socio-political construction of disability." There is, to be sure, a substantial corpus of clinical, empirical, and demographic work on disability. In North American universities, however, there is very little analytical/theoretical work produced about social disablement, in contrast to the burgeoning discipline "Disability Studies" in the British academy. (For example, Michael Oliver, *The Politics of Disablement,* Houndsmill, Basingstoke, Hampshire, and London: MacMillan, 1990; or the numerous issues of the British journal, *Disability, Handicap and Society.*) Thus, I was quite interested when a friend informed me that the text entitled *Feminism & Disability* was forthcoming from an American university press. I wanted to see what stance on disability the author would take, what insights she would provide, and whether her text would refer me to other theory done in this field.

I was not disappointed. *Feminism & Disability* offers an extensive bibliography with references to work on disability done by disability activists, feminists, mainstream sociologists, psychologists, and so on. In this regard, Hillyer's text will be a great resource for feminist academics theorizing disablement, the ways in which gender intersects with disability, the ways in which ableism compounds sexism, and so on. Oddly enough, however, I did not find a reference to either of Jenny Morris's insightful texts: *Able Lives: Women's Experience of Paralysis* (London: Women's Press, 1989), or *Pride Against Prejudice: Transforming Attitudes Toward Disability* (London: Women's Press, 1991).



Hillyer's aim in this text is an ambitious one. As she explains, she intends to join "women's experience of disability with feminist theory." For Hillyer, an endeavour of that sort requires closely scrutinizing, and re-examining, accredited knowledge of disability. A feminist perspective and feminist analysis is lacking from standard medical model reports, as well as from the literature of male-dominated disability organizations, she notes. Within both those genres, she asserts, women's experience of disability has been trivialized, ignored, or discounted.

Hillyer points out, moreover, that non-disabled feminists, too, have excluded women's experiences of disability from their analyses. Indeed, Hillyer claims to have written this book because her experience as the mother of a multiply-disabled young woman is not reflected in feminist literature. In order to take account of and validate the lives of women with disabilities, Hillyer argues, feminists must reassess many of their views, including notions of bodily integrity, dependence/independence, and care. She asserts that feminist agendas would be advanced if non-disabled feminists were to integrate insights drawn from women's perspectives on disablement. Hillyer notes, for instance, how conventional feminine gendering dovetails with societal expectations of women with disabilities. "If conventional femininity is handicapping," Hillyer observes, "an understanding of the double-bind of disabled women is essential to our efforts toward social change."

If I were to identify one shortcoming of this text, I would have to say that much of Hillyer's analysis lacks depth. That is to say, in order to cover a very broad range of issues, at times she discusses particular topics in narrow and selective ways, often passing quickly over their disparate complexities. For me, this tendency is exemplified in the short shrift Hillyer gives to the social disablement perspective on disability. In the social disablement view, "disabilities" are historically-specific phenomena produced in utterly inaccessible social contexts (viz. wherever there is inaccessible transportation, modes of communication, etc). Yet Hillyer never really articulates this argument, nor does she suggest the ways in which one might justify holding it. To the contrary, she seems content to associate this view of disability with disabled people's own "denial." Indeed, she writes that when "the distress disabled people experience" is attributed to societal oppression, disabled individuals are "prevent[ed] from forming a clear sense of their own identity." As I interpret it, Hillyer's remark not only diminishes the political import of the social disablement view of disability, but is also a rather patronizing one.

THE MORE WE GET TOGETHER

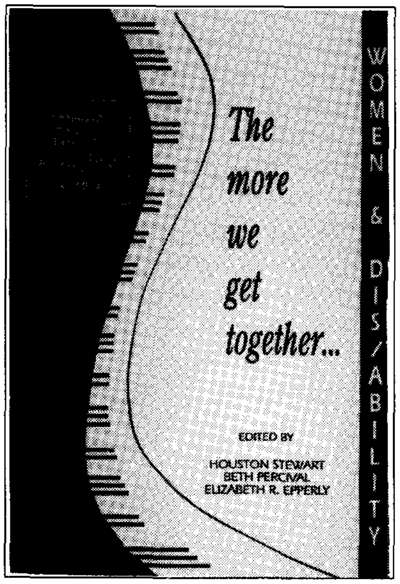
Houston Stewart, Beth Percival and Elizabeth R. Epperly, eds.Charlottetown: gynergy books, 1992.

by Deborah Kent

Movements have a proven tendency to fragment, even as they grow larger and stronger. Dedicated members of a movement may break into subgroups around a galaxy of distinctions, from age to ethnic background, from educational attainment to career. The disability rights movement and the women's movement have both struggled for a sense of solidarity while embracing the diverse perspectives of people from every stage in the life cycle, from every culture group and geographic region, representing an extraordinary range of abilities.

The 1990 conference of the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women met the issue of diversity head-on with its theme "the more we get together, the happier we'll be." *The More We Get Together* reprints twenty-two papers delivered at the conference, and raises a host of thought-provoking questions. The majority of the papers deal with disability, but others cover topics as outwardly varied as the women's temperance movement in the 19th century and the novels of L.M. Montgomery. The essays are arranged in four sections: "Difference and Dis/ability," "Herstory," "Caregiving and Mothering," and "Language and Writing."

Joan Meister's keynote address, "The More We Get Together," introduces disability in its many facets, and explores differences in terminology (disability vs. handicap vs. impairment). Meister surveys the needs of women with disabilities—access to information, educational and employment opportunities, sexual expression, reproductive choice, and, ultimately, greater self-esteem. As she points out, these needs are common to all women, but women with disabilities typically encounter more obstacles than their non-disabled peers.



In "Notes Toward a Unified Diversity," Sharon Dale Stone tears open some of our most cherished notions about differences and commonality. Stone, a lesbian who has a disability, contends that no one else can truly understand her life, because each individual's experience is unique. Why then, she asks, do we feel that we must obliterate our differences before we can communicate with one another? "Why is it so scary to face the fact that we don't have much in common?" she pursues. "Why is it necessary to 'overcome' or 'transcend' difference in order to see others as 'people equal in value and dignity?'" She does not ask that others accept her as being like they are, but instead wishes that they "will listen to what I say about my life, try to imagine what it is like, and then work with me to change what oppresses me."

Other pieces in the section on difference and dis/ability discuss women and psychiatric hospitalization, childhood sexual abuse and multiple personality disorder, and women with disabilities and the medical establishment. Particularly interesting is an article on the phenomenon of "passing" by Milana Todoroff and Tanya Lewis. Drawing on interviews with seven women who have disabilities, the authors conclude that passing, or working to appear "normal," is a healthy survival technique. The pressure to conform is crushing, and the penalties for failing to do so may be disastrous. As one informant confides, "It's frightening how unwanted [we are]. How people can't think of a place we ought to be other than extremely somewhere else."

Traditionally, the issues surrounding women with disabilities have been handled in separate books or special issues of feminist or disability rights periodicals. *The More We Get Together* is a refreshing change. Here the essays which focus directly on women with disabilities are interspersed with intriguing pieces on an assortment of other topics. In the section entitled "Herstory" a paper on the history of the disabled women's movement shares space with discussions of Lesbian Studies, women of Scottish ancestry, and the complex issues around ecofeminism. The section "Language and Writing" contains articles on writing workshops composed of women with disabilities, as well as pieces about romantic fiction and the ways language is used to mask the fact that most acts of domestic violence are committed by males. Women with disabilities belong here as a part of a sprawling social mural that encompasses virtually every aspect of women's experience.

Nearly all of the pieces in this book will be enlightening for both the uninitiated and for women who have already done some serious thinking about the convergence of women's issues and disability issues. The only essay which I find disturbingly weak is Beth Lawson's "Mothering a Disabled Child." Lawson writes that "tears, anger, frustration, and fear" have "remained an integral part of my