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## Presuming Competence: An Examination of Ableism in Film and Television

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PRESUMING COMPETENCE: AN EXAMINATION OF ABLEISM IN FILM AND  
TELEVISION

By

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## Introduction

At the 2015 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, comedian Daniel Sloss performed his stand-up routine titled “DARK”. The title references the fact that he is often considered a “dark comic” even though he doesn’t see his comedic style in the same light. After the success of “DARK”, Netflix, a streaming service and production company, recorded a performance of the show in front of an American audience. Netflix released “DARK” on their site in early September of 2018, making this “dark” Scottish comedian accessible to thousands of viewers who would not have otherwise seen him.

In the second half of his set, Sloss begins to tell the audience about his life at home, specifically about his younger sister Josie. He waved his hand at his hip, letting the audience know that his sister was small. “She’s not this height, she’s in a wheelchair.”<sup>1</sup> As soon as he mentions her disability, the mood of the audience shifts dramatically. Sloss is aware that the audience is uncomfortable, but he doesn’t care, he continues talking about his sister. He reveals to the audience that Josie has Cerebral Palsy, a disorder that he describes as “a disability that comes in a very wide spectrum of severity. You get some people with Cerebral Palsy who still lead very normal lives, they can walk and talk. So, they’re happy. Josie is a bit more on the other side of the spectrum”<sup>2</sup>.

Sloss spend the majority of the second half of his show telling jokes and stories about life with his sister Josie. Before he does this, he directly addresses the audience and explains why the

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<sup>1</sup> “DARK”, Directed by Ryan Polito.2018. Los Angeles, California. Netflix.DVD

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

stories and jokes he's telling are okay, but also why they're important, even if it makes the audience uncomfortable.

Daniel Sloss grew up surrounded by disability. He knew what it was like to tailor his days and activities to his sister's schedule and abilities. While Sloss himself does not identify as disabled, he spent years of his childhood confronting ableism. He incorporates and challenges the ableism he faced as a sibling of a person with disabilities in his comedy special "DARK". Sloss tells the audience "People sometimes get uncomfortable when you talk about disability. And I know why that is, and it's because you've not experienced it every day... People say to you, disability is never funny, NEVER FUNNY. What the fuck are you talking about? Disability can be hysterical. You just have to make sure that you're on the right side of the laughter... But to say that disability is never funny, to me, that is dehumanizing. You are saying that these people are not capable of doing something which you are capable of doing and that's laughing at the situation you're in. Of course, they're able to do that, they're human beings. The reason you say disability is never funny is because it makes you uncomfortable and you do not know how to deal with that. Instead of dealing with it rationally, you've nominated yourself to be offended on behalf of people that you think are weaker than you. So, you decided to stand up for them and nobody asked you to do that."<sup>3</sup> In this segment of his comedy special, Daniel Sloss proves that the negative impacts of ableism are not reserved to people with disabilities. Ableism, in simplest of terms, is the discrimination towards persons with disabilities often to the benefit of able-bodied persons.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

While Sloss did not call it ableism in his monologue, he did address several key components of this form of social prejudice. Ableism is exclusive in nature. Its purpose is to reinforce the myth that persons with disabilities are inferior to able-bodied people. Ableism continues the systemic oppression of those who identify as disabled. The ability to speak for themselves, no matter their actual physical ability to do so, can be taken from them as a consequence of ableism. This is what Sloss describes as “dehumanizing”, robbing a person with disabilities of their opportunity to speak for themselves or in this case laugh for themselves. As Sloss aptly pointed out, this is entirely for the benefit of a person without disabilities. Their momentary feeling of discomfort outweighs the creative expression or cathartic release of the person with disabilities.

### **Research Problem**

My thesis project will tackle the pervasive and often ignored issue of ableism in film and television. Ableism is not limited to discrimination and prejudice, but it can further be defined as a set of “beliefs, processes, and practices that produce a particular understanding of oneself, one’s body, and one’s relationship with others, based on abilities one values or exhibits”<sup>4</sup>. This definition is significantly more open ended. This definition is not limited to an actor, a perpetrator, of discrimination and the victim receiving it. This definition includes able-bodied persons, presumably how they have been led to believe that they are somehow superior to a person with disabilities. But as is reflected in our popular culture, how interactions between able-bodied persons shape perceptions of both disabled and abled bodies.

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<sup>4</sup> Gregor Wolbring. "The Politics of Ableism." *Development* 51, no. 2 (June 2008): 252. doi:10.1057/dev.2008.17.

Disability, when actually represented in film, is more often than not a negative representation. Writers, producers, and directors reinforce ableism, ableist slurs, and ableist stereotypes when they implement disability tropes in their films or television shows. A film trope is a common or reoccurring motif, cliché, stereotype, or literary device seen in films and television. But even when a writer or director is cognizant of tropes surrounding persons with disabilities in films and television, their attempts to subvert these harmful or potentially harmful tropes can end up reinforcing some of the very ideologies that they were trying to challenge in the first place.

The field of disability studies is in its infancy and as a consequence there is little visibility, attention, and recognition. Studying ableism should not be exclusive to a field in its beginning stages and a natural place for disability, ableism and its intersections to be studied is in the field of gender and feminist studies. Gender studies examines existing structures and institutions that continue the oppression of women, people of color, the LGBTQIA+ community, and more. On par with the focus and intentions of gender studies ableism should be included and recognized as an oppressive institution that influences the ways that people approach their everyday lives. DePauw furthers the argument by saying that “the scholarly inquiry of many feminist scholars addresses issues such as work, health, education, and sexuality, for example, yet disability issues are usually not included among the current topics for women’s studies...the intersection of gender and disability represents a frontier for both women’s studies and disability studies, and an exploration of how different “bodies” use, occupy, and define space differently will provide useful analyses that will further our critical understanding of the social construction

of gendered identities”.<sup>5</sup> DePauw points out the ways that existing in a gendered body can reflect or mirror the ways that existing in a disabled body can impact your entire life. The existing infrastructures of oppression make it merge or include the field of disability studies with the field of gender studies and vice versa.

Furthermore, Ableism interacts with every facet of a person’s identity. Disability can impact weight or weight fluctuations that could lead people to experience fatphobia or being a woman with a disability could put a person in more vulnerable position for abuse than a man with a disability. In studying media portrayals of disabled bodies and lives, I will also examine the ways that different identities impact disability, tropes surrounding disability, and casting.

### **Research**

It is important to establish that ableism is not a strictly American or western problem. In fact, ableism can be found in every corner of the world and depending on where you live it can have fatal consequences. But for the purposes of my thesis project, I will be looking at American film and television programming. I will also be focusing on television shows and movies that feature either a main character with a disability or a recurring character. It would be a disservice and a distraction to attempt to include every “Very Special Episode” about disability in American television.

To continue my research, it is important to establish a definition for disability. For that definition I turn to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 where disability is defined as “(with respect to an individual) A physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or

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<sup>5</sup> Karen P. DePauw ""Space: The Final Frontier": The Invisibility of Disability on the Landscape of Women Studies." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 17, no. 3 (1996): 19-23. doi:10.2307/3346867.

more of the major life activities of such individual; a record of such impairment; or being regarded as having such an impairment”<sup>6</sup>. This definition includes visible and hidden illnesses or disabilities, such as mental illness or autism. Therefore, I will incorporate examples of visible and invisible disability in film and television into my research. To further the definition of disability, one must acknowledge that disability acts as a social construct. A social construct is an ideology, belief, or idea that has been created and accepted as the “norm” by people in a society. Disability is a very real and tangible part of life, but the way that we treat, react to, and discriminate against persons with disabilities is socially constructed. The social construct of disability is heavily reinforced in the media we consume. Whether there are no disabled characters present in a film or the film uses disability as a punchline, these actions shape the way that people perceive persons with disabilities.

One of the final things that is necessary to address is the use of person first language, also known as people first language. According to the Center for Disease Control “People first language is used to speak appropriately and respectfully about an individual with a disability. People first language emphasizes the person first not the disability”<sup>7</sup>. This means saying “people with disabilities” instead of “the disabled”. For most of my work I will be using person first language, but there are times that I might use identity first language. Identity first language is the reverse of person first language, where you use a person’s disabled identity first when describing them. In identity first language, you might say that “he is autistic” instead of saying “he is a person with autism”. As J.R. Thorpe explains “The difference between the perspectives essentially boils down to personhood and disability: is it something that you have, or something

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<sup>6</sup> U.S. Congress. *The Americans with Disabilities Act*. Cong. Washington, D.C.: Office, 1992.

<sup>7</sup> Center for Disease Control. "Communicating with and about People with Disabilities." Advertisement.

that's at the core of your identity?"<sup>8</sup>. Because person first language is older and has been established as the appropriate and non-offensive way to discuss and write about disability, I will use person first language, with several exceptions for identity first language such as Deaf.

The title for this thesis is borrowed from the special education curriculum. Presuming Competence is a term used primarily by those educating the neurodiverse community. What it means is to assume or presume that a person with a disability has the "capacity to think, learn and understand- even if you do not see any tangible evidence that such is the case"<sup>9</sup> This approach of presuming competence will be used on characters with disabilities throughout film and television analysis. This title also serves as a reminder that people with disabilities are people first and deserve that presumption.

This project will be divided into chapters, with each chapter focusing on a specific film or television trope about a person with disabilities. Some tropes, like the "Inspiration Porn" trope, are well-documented and often addressed when discussing disability in film and television. Other tropes that I will be examining do not even have a homogenous name. In these chapters, I will be evaluating films and television shows that either subvert the aforementioned trope, reinforce the trope, or both. These case studies will be examining the tropes throughout the series or film, then analyzing the real-world implications of these tropes. The tropes are as follows (in no particular order):

1. The Asexual PWD

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<sup>8</sup>JR. Thorpe "This Is How To Talk About Disability, According To Disabled People." Bustle. August 24, 2018.

<sup>9</sup>A. Stout "Presuming Competence: What is it and Why is it Important?". *TheAutismSite.com*.  
<https://blog.theautismsite.greatergood.com/presume-competence/>

This trope robs a person with disabilities of a sexual identity. This trope rests on the common misbelief that disability and sexuality cannot exist simultaneously. In this trope we see disabled characters without romantic partners, uninterested in sex or romance, or a disabled characters interest in sex is played as a novelty, joke, or punchline.

Some examples include: *The Sessions*, *Glee*, *Community*, and *Atypical*

## 2. Inspiration Porn

The term Inspiration Porn was coined by comedian and activist Stella Young. The term refers to the trend of designating a person with a disability as inherently exceptional for simply living with a disability. When Inspiration Porn is present in film and television, it frames every action that a person with a disability makes as a victory. In this trope a disabled character exists for the pleasure and relief of both able-bodied characters and able-bodied viewers.

Some examples include: *Wonder*, *Stronger*, *Breathe*, and *The King's Speech*

## 3. Disability as a Burden

This is perhaps one of the most reductive tropes on the list. In this trope we see that characters with disabilities lives are reduced to their disability and their life is often framed as “not worth the effort”. This trope focuses on comparisons between disabled and able-bodied lifestyles and able-bodied lifestyles are always framed as superior to a disabled lifestyle. This trope features suicide and death as a resolution to disability.

Some examples include: *Million Dollar Baby*, *Me Before You*, *The Elephant man*, and *Gattaca*

#### 4. Crazy, Beautiful

The term pretty here is used to identify and recognize American beauty standards play a large role in representation of mental illness. Identifying this trope seeks to address the racism, colorism, and sexism that is all too present in our media industry. Mental illness is overwhelmingly portrayed as a problem for attractive cis, straight, white females. This erases entire populations affected by mental illness from the narrative while simultaneously reinforcing institutions of sexism, racism, transphobia and homophobia. This film trope does not accurately depict those impacted by mental illness and this problem begins with casting.

Some examples include: *Girl Interrupted*, *Thirteen Reasons Why*, *You're the Worst*, and *To The Bone*

#### 5. Disabled Mimicry

Perhaps the most pervasive of tropes and often intersects with other tropes on this list. This trope happens when disabled roles are given to actors without disabilities. There are several defenses by the film industry, like lack of actors with disabilities or characters were previously able bodied, but it has been likened to blackface by many disabled activists. It is a further insult to the lack of representation of disability in film and television, when the few disabled characters available are not played by persons with disabilities.

Some examples include: The Theory of Everything, Wonder, Daredevil, Atypical, Glee, and Stronger

## **Chapter One**

### **The Asexual PWD**

When looking at this trope it is important to first establish a definition for “Asexual”. Here Asexual is not interchangeable with recognized and accepted definitions of Asexual or Asexuality. Asexuality as a sexuality or sexual identity is mostly regarded as a spectrum, with varying degrees of comfort with sexual behavior. For the purposes of this thesis the use of the term asexual will instead describe characters having asexuality projected onto them, regardless of their true sexuality or sexual identity. It will have characters robbed of their own sexual identity or the ability to determine it for themselves. This trope is based on the misconception and myth that Persons with Disabilities or PWDs cannot be sexually active or are not capable of having romantic partners.

We see this play out in a few ways. The first way that we see this is when characters with disabilities do not have romantic interests in their story arcs or in longer running television programs, they’re relationships are short lived or occur much later than those of their able-bodied co-stars. The second way we can see this trope play out is when persons with disabilities do have relationships, their romantic partners are also PWDs. This reinforces a tired myth that only people with disabilities could possibly be attracted to people with disabilities. Its further others PWDs and persons in interabled relationships. And third and easiest to miss way we can see this trope, comes out in most progressive programming. This is when a PWDs interest in pursuing sex or romance is framed as a joke. That it is inherently hilarious that they could be interested in romance “given their condition”.

One repeat offender of this trope is the Fox Television show *Glee*<sup>10</sup>. *Glee* features two recurring or main cast characters with disabilities. The main cast includes Artie Abrams, a paraplegic, played by able-bodied actor and dancer Kevin McHale. The other recurring character with disabilities is Becky Jackson played by Lauren Potter, an actress who lives with disability. Over the course of six seasons, both characters pursued and experienced romance, but they fell into this trope through the first and second ways this trope presents itself.

Artie's relationships came later than the other characters in the program, almost as though it was an afterthought from the writers. Additionally, Most of his relationships were "casual" lasting a few episodes and required no build up the way that say Finn and Rachel's relationship or Brittany and Santana's relationship did. His relationships were not presented with the same weight as the able-bodied characters in the show.

Becky Jackson also experienced this problem throughout the series. Likely because she was in the series for a shorter amount of time, she had less relationships. Still, the relationships she had were not treated as serious as other relationships in the series, even though most relationships depicted in the series were high school relationships. The other aspect of the Asexual PWD trope Becky falls victim to is that the majority of her romantic partners were also persons with disabilities. This combination of short-lived romantic relationships and the fact that most of the people involved in these relationships were persons with disabilities only continues stereotypes and myths that persons with disabilities only date or are able to date other people with disabilities.

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<sup>10</sup> *Glee*. Created by Ryan Murphy, Ian Brennan, Brad Fulchuk. Fox. May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

These misconceptions do not only exist on screen. In his book *In Sickness and In Health: Love, Disability, and a Quest to Understand the Perils and Pleasures of Interabled Romance*, Author and Harvard Graduate Ben Mattlin writes about his own experiences with ableism and his marriage. His book is a set of small case studies of interabled couples and their experiences navigating what it means to have long term committed relationships in a world that questions your ability to even have a relationship in the first place. He begins his book with an introduction to himself and his relationship, not clearly defining ableism, but instead identifying the ableism that surrounds not only himself but every reader and American. “To the media and the general Public, this kind of amatory partnering is often treated as an odd phenomenon. Not long ago, the cover of *People* magazine flaunted the marriage of Gabby Gifford’s- the brain-injured former congresswoman-and her husband, astronaut Mark Kelly, as a “Special but unconventional Love Affair. “Is that supposed to be flattering? This Treacly hooey could give you diabetes”.<sup>11</sup> The problem with media portrayals of interabled romance like this is that it suggests that there is an inherent inequality between persons with disabilities and persons without disabilities.

Framing romance in this way places persons without disabilities as “saints” while simultaneously telling persons with disabilities that they are “lucky” just to even have someone breathe in their general direction. These portrayals reinforce internalized ableism amongst the disabled community and consistently pointing out interabled relationships “uniqueness” only furthers that internalized ableism. This “uniqueness” is also an unfounded claim, as Mattlin discusses in his book, there is not much data and research on interabled relationships. “Quick research showed that, although the statistics are unreliable, there are many marriages between

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<sup>11</sup> Ben Mattlin. *In Sickness and Health: Love, Disability, and a Quest to Understand the pleasures and Perils of Interabled Romance*. Boston: Beacon Press.2018

people with and people without disabilities”.<sup>12</sup> With limited research it is easy to jump to the conclusion that interabled relationships are in fact “unique” or “special”, but the reality is that with limited research we have no concrete or definitive answer on how many interabled relationships that there are. Regardless of research, continuing to suggest that interabled relationships are “unusual” only encourages othering of persons with disabilities, specifically in the dating world.

The third way that the Asexual PWD trope presents itself in film and popular media is by framing a person with disabilities interest in sex or a relationship as a joke. Some of the most progressive and inclusive programming featuring actors and characters with disabilities falls into this trope because of this. One of the most notable examples of this is the Netflix original series *Atypical*. *Atypical* is groundbreaking in many ways, it features several actors and characters on the spectrum, openly discusses police negligence and abuse towards persons with disabilities and creates an open and active dialogue about parenting a child on the spectrum. At the same time, the trailer exemplifies how it fits into this trope.

While *Atypical* does feature an interabled relationship between main cast characters, the first trailer released for the series opens with the family eating dinner when Sam’s mother asked him how his therapy session was that day. He responds “She thinks that I should put myself out there and find someone to have sex with. She didn’t say the sex part, I added that”.<sup>13</sup> Immediately after saying this his sister laughs and his parents pause uncomfortably. The audience is supposed to laugh too.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> *Atypical*. Created by Robia Rashid. Netflix. August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

Arguably, it is very funny, the idea that a child would boldly discuss his sex life at the dinner table is shocking and can make anyone giggle. But when you look closer at what is happening behind the joke, it is less funny. Sam is a person living with autism and spent his whole life trying to fit into a world that is not designed for him, Theoretically this was one of the first times he mentioned his interest in romance to his family and he was met with laughter. Is it just the delivery of the line that is humorous or is it also the fact that Sam is a person with a disability and there is something inherently other about him pursuing someone romantically? Perhaps if this was the only instance of a joke like this then it could be the delivery, but it is not. The show is littered with jokes and jabs at Sam's expense focusing solely on his "inability" to pick up or understand women. Moreover, Sam has not been typecast as a loser in a raunchy comedy produced by Judd Apatow, every joke about his romantic failings is connected to his identity as a person with autism.

He frightened a woman away with his smile, something he has been working on in therapy, and he blindly follows the instructions of his girlfriend. The jokes written about his dating life at their core always refer back to his disability. In doing this, writers tell viewers that there is a distinct difference between person with a disability and a person without, and that difference is one can successfully pursue romantic relationships and the other is laughable.

Another progressive television program that falls into this trope in a similar way is ABC's *Speechless*. The series is progressive in many of the same ways. Additionally, the main character is played by an actor with a disability. But this does not stop the show from continuously poking fun at J.J.'s romantic pursuits and interests. J.J. is nonverbal and lives with cerebral palsy. Because of this he requires an aide to speak to others for him. J.J. himself is regularly characterized as a person who objectifies women and is interested purely in sex. A

problematic characterization in its own right, it becomes more problematic and complicated when we consider that this is the way that J. J.'s (a PWD) sexuality or interest in sex is consistently depicted. J.J. and his genuine interest in pursuing a romantic relationship is reduced to punchlines episode after episode.<sup>14</sup>

Programs like *Atypical* and *Speechless* challenge this trope by making their characters with disabilities have romantic partners or having interabled relationships and exploring those dynamics. However, they still succumb to the trope they were attempting to subvert by constantly reducing their character's interest in romance to jokes.

One film that attempts to challenge the trope is the 2012 film *The Sessions*<sup>15</sup>, an independent film that followed a person living with a disability hiring a sex therapist to help him lose his virginity. In many ways the show challenged the trope, it was upfront and at times graphic with the idea that people with disabilities are sexually active and can be sexually active, regardless of your ableist preconceived notions. It featured an interabled sexual relationship that would turn into one of romance. All that being said, the whole film was about an adult man with a disability having to pay someone to have sex with him. As revolutionary as it appeared to be, it still reinforced the idea that sex is a novelty for PWDs and that able-bodied folks would not normally be attracted to persons with disabilities, they have to literally be paid.

One example of a television program that successfully challenges the Asexual PWD trope in every way is the Lifetime reality television program *Little Women: LA*<sup>16</sup> and its spinoff *Little Women: Atlanta*. The show is reminiscent of other reality television programming like *The Real*

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<sup>14</sup> *Speechless*. Created by Scott Silveri. ABC. September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> *The Sessions*. Directed by Ben Lewin. Performed by Helen Hunt, John Hawkes, William H. Macy. United States: Fox, 2013. DVD.

<sup>16</sup> *Little Women: LA*. Created By Gerald Massime. United States: Lifetime, 2014. HULU

Housewives of Orange County, but it is distinct in one way: all the women the show follows live with dwarfism. Some of the women are married, some of the women are divorced. Some of the women's partners are people living with dwarfism and some of them are people who do not have dwarfism. *Little Women: LA* examines these women's lives masterfully. Using the structure of the reality tv show, the women are able to share their opinions and experiences about their relationships in an interview setting. They discuss the difficulties of conceiving with dwarfism and how to buy a house that was not built for you or what they found attractive about their partner.

Additionally, the show is designed for people for any fan of reality television. Instead of targeting audiences that prefer progressive television programming, *Little Women: LA* exposes viewers to all the ways that disability can impact a person's life. In keeping the genre conventions of reality television, writers and creators avoid falling into ableist tropes, specifically the Asexual PWD trope.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Inspiration Porn**

Perhaps one of the most well-known tropes surrounding ableism in popular culture, this trope can be summarized beautifully by the character Ray Dimeo (played by Mason Cook) in the ABC television show *Speechless* "It's a portrayal of people with disabilities as one dimensional saints who only exist to warm the hearts and open the minds of able-bodied people".<sup>17</sup> In most of the first season this television show regularly challenges and pokes fun at this cliché depiction of people with disabilities as heroes for doing everyday tasks. In fact, moments after defining

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<sup>17</sup> *Speechless*. Created by Scott Silveri. ABC. September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2016.

Inspiration Porn, Ray follows up with the comment “It’s terrible, but it’s great for winning essay contests. Damn it!”<sup>18</sup> This subsequent joke only highlights how the agency of people with disabilities can be taken from for the betterment or comfort of able-bodied folks.

The name inspiration porn is jarring and humorous and that is the intention. Hearing those two words together almost seems wrong or inappropriate, but the phrase forces listeners to take a moment and consider why they are watching what they are watching. Or perhaps the more important question, what are they getting out of it?

The term was coined by comedian and activist Stella Young who in her 2014 TED Talk describes inspiration porn’s origin as being the fact that “we have been sold the lie that disability is a Bad Thing, capital B, capital T. It’s a bad thing, and to live with a disability makes you exceptional. It’s not a bad thing and it doesn’t make you exceptional. And in the past few years, we’ve been able to propagate this lie even further via social media... These images, and there are lots of them out there, are what we call inspiration porn. And I use the term porn deliberately, because they objectify one group of people for the benefit of another group of people. So, in this case, we’re objectifying disabled people for the benefit of nondisabled people. The purpose of these images is to inspire you, to motivate you, so we can look at them and think “well, however bad my life is, it could be worse. I could be that person””.<sup>19</sup> In her 2014 Ted talk, Young answers the question for viewers what are you getting out of it?

Inspiration porn operates on several different levels, shaping the way that persons without disabilities feel towards persons with disabilities and the way that persons with disabilities feel about themselves and that is what makes it so poisonous. The first way Inspiration porn operates

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Stella Young. “I’m not your inspiration, thank you very much”. Filmed April 2014

has already been touched on by both Young and Speechless character Ray Dimeo. Inspiration porn takes the humanity out of people with disabilities. By framing the narrative in educating or inspiring a person without a disability or people without disabilities, viewers lose the concept of human nature or mistakes made by persons with disabilities. The same concepts that would make viewers dislike characters, be annoyed by characters, or truly identify with characters. Those concepts or connections are crucial for humanizing characters in film and television and they are consistently absent from media portrayals that fall into this trope.

Another way that this trope presents itself is exaggerating the struggle or negative experience associated with disability. In focusing on the negative things, a person with a disability experiences because of their disability, a film or television program reinforces the myth that disability is inherently negative, that disability is a burden that no one should have to experience. Disability is a social construct; media portrayals of disability help to shape how we understand and interact with disability and narratives like inspiration porn continue the othering of persons with disabilities and the fear surrounding disability itself. Additionally, the focus on the negative impacts of disability that will eventually lead to a triumph or overcoming those negative experiences are not wholly accurate to living with a disability.

It would be wrong to say that people living with disabilities did not have to overcome internalized ableism and depending on their circumstances, perhaps they would have to relearn tasks that they had once done easily as an able-bodied person. But framing the narrative as one smooth hill or a mountain to climb is not simply not real life. Learning to be comfortable with your wheelchair doesn't mean that you will not spend the rest of your life anxious that you'll be discriminated against in your workplace or how often you'll struggle navigating the American health insurance landscape. It also does not account for the fact that you do not have to be body

positive or practice self-love 24/7, sometimes a person needs to be really mad at their body, especially when that body is failing them. Inspiration porn does not show viewers what life is like after a person has “overcome” some kind of feat but now has to call ahead to a restaurant to find out if their entrance and bathroom are handicap accessible. The struggles depicted in inspiration porn are ableist because again they frame disability only in terms that a person without a disability could comprehend it.

The third and final way that inspiration porn operates to influence the way that Americans experience disability is that the emphasis of the narrative is the feeling or impact the person with a disability has on those around them and the audience. Viewers intentionally seek out these films for a feel-good ending and inspiration porn does not disappoint. No matter how small or large the feat that the person with a disability is intended to overcome over the course of the film or series, the character will always succeed one way or another. This lets the audience smile and leave satisfied. The same thing can be seen in these programs for characters without disabilities. They are experiencing disability through a distorted and inspirational lens of their family, coworker, friend, loved one, etc. and watching them succeed (even in small ways) is for their benefit, almost more so than for the character with a disability. By placing the emphasis on how the character with disabilities success affects the people around them, their story (however problematic) is no longer their story. Inspiration porn has robbed persons with disabilities of a limited opportunity to be in control of their own narratives and tell their stories the way they experienced them.

What inspiration porn does to people without disabilities is first and foremost confirm their myth and fear that the worst thing that could ever happen to them is to be or become disabled. As Young pointed out viewers have the comfort of saying “Well, however bad my life

is, it could be worse. I could be that person”.<sup>20</sup> In misrepresenting disability and living with disability, inspiration porn exacerbates these myths and misconceptions held by the able-bodied community. Moreover, by taking the focus of the narrative away from the person with a disability and instead telling a story about how inspirational they are or how they’ve changed the life of their best friend, inspiration porn tells able-bodied audiences that people with disabilities aren’t real people. By stealing their own stories away from them and repackaging them, Inspiration Porn gives able-bodied audiences the excuse to ignore and deny ableism in their language, workplace, personal life, and world around them because people with disabilities are beings that exist to inspire you and comfort you. They make you feel better about yourself and as a consequence you do not feel the need to participate in the fight for disability rights and you do not believe disability advocates when they challenge you. Inspiration Porn allows able-bodied audiences to go on continuing to believe that people with disabilities are flawless and that they exist not for themselves but for the entertainment and education of people without disabilities.

Inspiration Porn can be incredibly damaging to people with disabilities as well.

Inspiration Porn only aggravates internalized ableism that people with disabilities experience on a regular basis. Internalized ableism can tell persons with disabilities that they are only worth their productivity or that no one could possibly love them because of their disability. Inspiration porn, however, can tell persons with disabilities that they are supposed to be an inspiration, that they are here to educate and inspire people without disabilities and that that is their purpose. This narrative can be dangerous because being inspirational is a lot of work and effort. It is unnecessary stress placed upon a person with a disability. Not every challenge will become a triumph, lesson, or an inspiration and that is not reflective of the person living with a disability,

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid

but instead reflective of how we have come to conceptualize disability. Furthermore, disability looks different for everyone, it is in no way a “one size fits all” experience and the idea that living with a disability is inherently inspirational is a reductive tale that only furthers public misunderstanding of disability.

Arguably one of the best examples of Inspiration Porn in American cinematic history is the 2003 film *Radio*<sup>21</sup> starring Cuba Gooding Jr. and Ed Harris. The film follows Coach Jones (Ed Harris) as he takes Radio (Cuba Gooding Jr.) under his wing after his high school football team attacked him. Radio is a person with a developmental disability and Coach Jones takes it upon himself to educate him and introduce him to the community. It was based on the “Inspirational true story” of James Robert Kennedy who for years attended his local high school and assisted in coaching the school’s basketball and football teams.

The film starts out with introducing Radio as living a carefree life, collecting trash and roaming his town, not bothering anyone. He seems to be content with this lifestyle, but it should be mentioned that Cuba Gooding Jr.’s portrayal of a person with a disability is abhorrent and insulting at best, which tells us right from the beginning of the film even though Radio is the title character, his story and his feelings are not what is important in the film. If they were, Cuba Gooding Jr. would have likely had to do a more nuanced portrayal of a person with a disability or at least a less insulting one. Soon Radio is tied up and left in a utility shed by the Hanna football team, they were upset because a person with a disability didn’t return (one of) their footballs.

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<sup>21</sup> *Radio*. Directed by Michael Tollin. United States: Columbia Pictures. 2003.DVD

Coach Jones is introduced as a white savior character who rescues Radio and asks him to help coach the team, the same team that minutes ago literally tied him up. Radio agrees and the two become friends and the team becomes more successful as the season continues, the film suggests it is because of Radio's encouragement. For an away game Coach Jones decides that Radio should join the team and gets his mother's permission, who agrees but makes it clear how skeptical she is of his motivations. Jones however did not clear this with his supervisor who would not let Radio (an adult man) on the bus with high schoolers and Jones leaves Radio at the school where Radio stands in the rain listening to the team lose on a radio.

As football season comes to an end, Coach Jones struggles to figure out what to do with Radio, now that he has integrated him into his life and the lives of his players. He decides that Radio should go to school, without formally enrolling him, Radio spends his days in Jones' class, against the wishes of the principal and the school board. Despite a total lack of training and knowledge in education of special needs students Coach Jones takes it upon himself to teach Radio how to read and write and when all Radio can accomplish is squiggly lines on a piece of paper, this is framed as a great success and that he is now able to communicate with his peers. The film ends with Radio receiving an honorary diploma at graduation and the whole graduating class cheering him on. The narrator tells the viewers that that was the proudest moment of Coach Jones's life and Radio was invited to stay at Hanna High as long as he wanted or needed to.

What I have mentioned from this film are merely the most notable moments of Inspiration Porn from Radio<sup>22</sup>, but the whole film is littered with instances of Inspiration Porn. Right off the bat it is clear that the story is not about Radio, but instead about how radio

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid

impacted Coach Jones and the students of Hanna High. Radio was expected to work with people who had abused him because a man with limited understanding of disability thought it would be good for himself and his team. From the beginning of the film it is clearly established that Radio does not have autonomy in the film and the person who becomes his guardian is not his mother, but instead Coach Jones.

Coach Jones is shaped by the “lessons” that Radio teaches him over the course of the school year, and it is revealed to the audience Coach Jones’s true motive for reaching out to “help” Radio. When Jones was a child, he witnessed a child with a disability experience abuse and neglect for years and he did nothing about it, it is a great regret of his. Radio is a way for Jones to pay it forward and redeem himself. This proves that Radio’s story is not his own and is in fact to benefit Jones entirely. By assisting Radio grow up and integrate himself in the community, Jones is attempting to absolve himself of past mistakes and traumas.

Scene after scene, Radio<sup>23</sup> proves that the title character’s purpose is to make those around him better or to educate those around him. Radio himself has limited (if any) agency. This is indicative of the Inspiration Porn trope and similar themes can be seen in films like *Wonder*, a film about a child with a disability, Auggie, who is transitioned into mainstream school after years of being homeschooled. Auggie acts as a one-man anti-bullying campaign and ultimately teaches his classmates, family members, and viewers about the importance of acceptance. This example of Inspiration Porn mirrors Radio in the ways in which Auggie is portrayed as existing to educate those around him and it even concludes with the same end of year graduation and standing ovation for the character with a disability.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid

Speechless<sup>24</sup> is a television series that regularly challenges and critiques the Inspiration Porn trope. As a television program about a person with a disability, the characters in the show are well aware of the consistent portrayal of persons with disabilities as inspiring heroes or saints that exist merely to educate people without disabilities. They show the way that Inspiration Porn can have a direct effect on the life of a person with a disability, J.J. receives a standing ovation for simply making it to class and his life and story is co-opted by a stranger for their essay contest. The show thoughtfully demonstrates the ways that the ableism that Inspiration Porn perpetuates can impact both people with disabilities and people without. There are endless examples in popular culture of Inspiration Porn, J.J. says he “blames Tiny Tim” the fictional child with a disability from A Christmas Carol, but that example only proves how entrenched and accepted Inspiration Porn is in our culture. If there is an example dating back to 19<sup>th</sup> century England, it’s safe to say that the problem is pervasive.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Disability As a Burden**

Disability as a Burden relies heavily on our collective interpretation and understanding that living with a disability is the antithesis to living without a disability. This trope abuses the way in which disability was socially constructed and attempts to further the idea that disability is an undesirable trait or quality, that disability (and not the laws and social systems we have put in place about disability) make life unbearable.

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<sup>24</sup> *Speechless*. Created by Scott Silveri. ABC. September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2016.

Disability as a burden is similar to Inspiration Porn in the way that it emphasizes the differences between an able-bodied lifestyle and a lifestyle with a disability. A key difference between the two is that the Disability as a Burden trope does not present an inspiring message or lesson attached to living with a disability, instead it tells characters and audiences that living with a disability is “not worth it”. This trope reduces a character with a disability solely to their disability and to all the real or imagined negatives associated with living with that disability.

Another feature of this trope is that death and suicide are regularly presented as a resolution to disability. If we return to the definition of ableism that states that it is a set of “beliefs, processes, and practices that produce a particular understanding of oneself, one’s body, and one’s relationship with others, based on abilities one values or exhibits”<sup>25</sup> that it is clear to see that by determining or deciding a life is “not worth living” because of a disability is an inherently ableist narrative. This trope purports that living without a disability, no matter the lifestyle, means, or experiences is fundamentally superior to living with a disability regardless of lifestyle, means or experiences.

A film that perfectly captures the Disability as a Burden trope is the 2016 film *Me Before You*. The film follows Lou, a young cheerful woman who has just accepted a job as a caretaker for a person with a disability, even though she has limited experience. Her client is a young, attractive, incredibly wealthy man who is paralyzed after a recent accident. The film stresses how active and adventurous Will once was, when he had the ease of full mobility, and how that active lifestyle is somehow a core characteristic to his personality and way of life.

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<sup>25</sup> Gregor Wolbring. "The Politics of Ableism." *Development* 51, no. 2 (June 2008): 252. doi:10.1057/dev.2008.17.

As the film progresses, Lou and Will (unsurprisingly) fall in love with each other and Will begins to adopt a more active lifestyle than he had previous to Lou becoming his caretaker. He still refuses to travel to certain places or attempt certain activities that he once enjoyed because he wants to experience them as “the old me”.<sup>26</sup> Despite his love affair with Lou, which happened after his accident, Will decides to end his life through assisted suicide, leaving everyone around him hurt but understanding of his decision.

What is so ridiculous about this film in particular, is that Will lives a life filled with love and comfort. Disability is a burden for him only through his lack of physical mobility, which is not the case for the majority of people living with disabilities. Will, unlike most Americans living with disabilities, does not have to worry about how to pay for his healthcare, medications, or any potential experimental treatments. He doesn't have to make a decision to ration medications because they are too expensive<sup>27</sup>, he has the comfort of knowing that he will be taken care of no matter what. Furthermore, he has a beautiful woman who is in love with him and has only known him as a man with a disability. She regularly tells him how happy he makes her and how profound an impact he's had on her life. This is not a wholly inaccurate or unique experience for a person with a disability, what is inaccurate, however, is framing their romance as Will “never being enough” for Lou. That his disability will always get in the way of their relationship and that his masculinity has been so damaged by disability that he will never be able to treat her properly in a relationship. On top of everything, Will is living an affluent life. Unlike many people with disabilities he does not have to juggle working or overworking himself to

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<sup>26</sup> *Me Before You*. Directed by Thea Sharrock. Performed by Emilia Clarke, Sam Claflin. United States: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), 2016. Film.

<sup>27</sup> Bram Sable-Smith. “Insulin’s High Cost Leads to Rationing.” *NPR*, September 1st, 2018.

support his lifestyle or receive government benefits simply to be able to live. Will can have anything in the world, but he is still unsatisfied because the only thing he truly desires is mobility.

It is important for me to say here that disability and living with disability is not a universal experience. There are many people living with a disability that are content with their lives and are comfortable with what living with a disability means. There are also people, like the character of Will, who are not content with living with a disability, that they are constantly searching for a way out or a way to no longer be disabled, however that presents itself. There is not a right or wrong way to be disabled.

That being said assisted suicide is a regular topic of discussion, with several states in the U.S. having or proposing laws that allow for it. Within the last few years, California added its name to the list of States with Assisted Suicide laws.<sup>28</sup> While these U.S. laws are currently written for terminally ill patients, Disability Rights Advocates have been fiercely outspoken against these laws. They argue that “there aren’t enough safeguards in these bills. In a letter to Wolk last month, Deborah Doctor, a legislative advocate for Disability Rights California, wrote that disabled people are vulnerable to abuse and could be coerced by family members not acting in the patient’s best interests. Relatives, she said, could put pressure on people to take life-ending medication”.<sup>29</sup> While the laws might not include people living with disabilities at the moment, there is no language that excludes them from these laws or being eligible in the future.

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<sup>28</sup> Death With Dignity. “Take Action in Your State”. March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2019

<sup>29</sup> Anna Gorman. “Why Disability-Rights Advocates Are Fighting Doctor-Assisted Suicide”. *The Atlantic*. June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

But Lennard Davis, a professor of Disability Studies, suggests that disability rights advocates efforts in condemning the legalization of assisted suicide may be misplaced. Davis reminds listeners that the laws are not written for and do not apply to people with disabilities. That in fighting this fight before it affects your community, you're potentially doing more harm than good. And he critiques advocates in saying that "The problem is that disability advocates and scholars have come to see physician-assisted suicide as an assault on the disabled. The fundamental error they've made is that they've equated disability with dying".<sup>30</sup>

What Davis fails to address in his interview is that disability advocates are not the ones that have equated disability with death. This narrative is one that is rampant and ever present in our current culture and climate and it is one that persons living with disabilities and disability rights advocates have to fight against on a regular basis. People with disabilities regularly have to prove to the able-bodied world that living with a disability is better than being dead.

The sentiment that Davis critiques and attaches to disability rights advocates is the exact sentiment that defines the Disability as a Burden trope. In this trope disability has been equated with death, so why not simply end one's life? This trope relies on telling the story of a previous "better" able-bodied life that has ended and what is left is a disabled life. The character or characters must consider if the disabled life is even worth living after reflecting on the previous "better" life. This trope even plays out in Oscar winning film *Million Dollar Baby*<sup>31</sup>. After an illegal hit in a boxing match, Maggie (Hillary Swank) is left to be a ventilator dependent quadriplegic. She asks her coach to help her end her life and he does so.

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<sup>30</sup>Melissa Block. Interview with Lennard Davis. *All things Considered*, NPR. September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2005.

<sup>31</sup> *Million Dollar Baby*. Directed by Clint Eastwood. Performed by Hilary Swank, Clint Eastwood, Morgan Freeman. United States: Warner Bros, 2004. DVD.

The problem with these films equating death and disability is that it is harmful narrative to propagate. While it might be the experience of some people living with a disability, it is most certainly not the experience of all people living with disabilities. When this trope is used it tells people who do not live with disabilities that it is okay to equate disability and death, that it is okay to believe that your life is superior simply because you do not have a disability, that it is okay to automatically assume a person with a disability must be sad because of their disability.

The biggest problem with Will's assisted suicide in *Me Before You* was not how great his life was and all the luxuries, he had access to. The biggest problem was that his death equated disability with death for audiences and characters alike. It further normalized the toxic myth that a life with disability is not a life worth living. It is the same myth that disability rights advocates are concerned about and currently fighting when they fight against assisted suicide and a host of other complex social systems.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Crazy, Beautiful**

The average American understands disability is almost never mental illness. For many both those who experience it and those who do not, mental illness and disability are two separate entities. Despite these ideas of separation between the two, federal, state, and local governments classify multiple mental illnesses as disabilities. People who experience disorders like Schizophrenia, Bipolar Disorder, and PTSD are a protected class that can receive "benefits". At the same time, people with mental illness experience severe stigma and face public misunderstanding and condemnation for things beyond their control.

The separation and parallels between disability and mental illness are important in the defining and recognizing this particular trope. Like the Inspiration Porn trope there exists a fetishization of the mentally ill within films and television. Viewers possess a fascination with watching a person's life fall apart and the sad suicidal narratives associated with mental illness in popular media. This contributes to stigma and misunderstanding surrounding mental illness. The writing of these characters is poorly researched about the particular illness, one note, and portrays them as responsible for their own "demise" or the "demise" of those around them.

Because of viewership, there does not seem to be a lack of films or television programs about characters navigating life with mental illness. Sometimes it's a later season development, sometimes it's not the main character, and sometimes it is not the focal point of the plot. Regardless the commonality of this film/television trope has much more to do with whose story is being told or we see in front of the screen much more so than if we even hear about people with disabilities or how those stories are told. This trope is about representation.

I cannot say this enough: disability impacts people regardless of race, sexuality, class, gender, age, or location. That being said there is an alarming, though unsurprising, trend of writing and casting straight, cis, white, upper-class, slender females as characters with mental illness. It is important to recognize that people who fit into these identities do experience mental illness, it is arguably more important to recognize that there are entire populations absent from popular media.

When discussing mental illness, it has real life consequences. Dr. Brian Mustanski et al suggests in his article on Mental Health Disorders, Psychological Distress, and Suicidality in a Diverse Sample of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youths by stating "bisexual and transgender individuals might experience more mental disorders resulting from being exposed to

stigma both in the majority population and in the LGBT community”<sup>32</sup>. Combined with facts like LGBT youths suicide attempts were five times more likely than heterosexual youth suicide attempts to require medical attention<sup>33</sup> and that “In a national study, 40% of transgender adults reported having made a suicide attempt. 92% of these individuals reported having attempted suicide before the age of 25”<sup>34</sup>. These facts and statistics call to question the lack of representation of transgender characters with mental illness in mainstream film and television. The Trevor Project, the leading non-for-profit providing suicide and crisis intervention to LGBTQIA+ youth under the age of 25, reports an increase of calls to their hotline any time legislation against the LGBTQIA+ community is proposed or presented to the media.

Few film and television programs depict transgender characters and those that do rarely chose to cast actors or actresses that identify as transgender. One tv series that received accolades and GLAAD awards for its inclusion and representation of a complex trans character of color was *Orange is the New Black*<sup>35</sup>. But the character of Sophia Burset, played by Laverne Cox, never really depicted suffering from mental illness despite the exorbitantly high rates of mental illness among the transgender community. The limitation of transgender characters and transgender characters suffering from mental illness has detrimental effects on the general population. Not only does it invalidate the experience of LGBTQIA+ youth, but it reinforces the narrative of only a “particular” kind of person has mental illness.

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<sup>32</sup> IMPACT. (2010). *Mental health disorders, psychological distress, and suicidality in a diverse sample of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youths*. *American Journal of Public Health*. 100(12), 2426-32

<sup>33</sup> CDC. (2016). *Sexual Identity, Sex of Sexual Contacts, and Health-Risk Behaviors Among Students in Grades 9-12: Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance*. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*

<sup>35</sup> *Orange is the New Black*. Created By Jenji Kohan. Performed by Taylor Schilling, Danielle Brooks, Taryn Manning. Netflix.2013.TV Series.

Speaking of a “particular” kind of person we will now look at multiple examples of the Crazy, Beautiful trope. The Crazy, Beautiful trope is defined by the larger role American beauty standards play in representation of both mental illness and films and television. It is the tendency of television programs and films to cast actress (or actors) who fit general beauty conventions as characters with mental illness. These films and television programs also typically depict these same characters as upper-middle class, white, cis and straight. This name identifies key components of the trope while simultaneously separating them with a comma. Crazy is an ableist slur that is sometimes reappropriated by a person with a mental illness but more often than not said in derogatory fashion. Here it is being used to denote the ways that characters with disabilities are often written or portrayed. The word beautiful is used to denote the beauty standards that are expected by the industry and overtime by the viewers. These standards have erased the experiences of entire populations, some of which I have previously addressed.

The first example of the Crazy, Beautiful trope is a Netflix original film *To the Bone*. *To the Bone* depicts a young teenage girl suffering from Anorexia. Anorexia rarely conceptualized as a disability, but it is often a co-occurring mental illness and causes life threatening and debilitating physical illnesses. Recovering from Anorexia and other eating disorders is a long process that often requires hospitalizations, rehabilitation facilities, and is debilitating. All of which mirrors many experiences of persons with disabilities. Coupled with the fact that it is a recognized mental illness and treated as such, I am including it in this thesis.

The film follows the story of Ellen played by Lily Collins, a young woman who has been suffering with Anorexia for an extended period of time and regularly sought treatment for it. The film begins at her newest treatment, which was depicted as her last hope and she was portrayed as stubborn and not receptive to treatment. This film stands out from most because the

writer/director suffered from multiple eating disorders herself and wrote based on her personal experiences with treatment. As a challenge to the trope, in the group home most of the other characters suffered from eating disorders but didn't fit within the parameters of the Crazy, Beautiful trope. One character even suffered from binge eating disorder. Binge eating disorder was recently classified as a disorder in the DSM-V and is associated with "eating much more rapidly than normal, eating until feeling uncomfortably full, eating large amounts of food when not feeling physically hungry, feeling alone because of being embarrassed by how much one is eating, and feeling disgusted with oneself, depressed, or very guilty after overeating"<sup>36</sup> With regards to my thesis though, we cannot look to these characters because they are supporting characters, many of whom are barely given an origin story and exist to further Ellen's story arch.

Ellen's size is another key characteristic of this trope. The film's name, *To the Bone*, rings true of Ellen's body type in the film. Bones are unnaturally protruding, and she is severely underweight. While this is intended to depict the consequences of Anorexia Nervosa it again is not wholly representative of those who struggle with the disorder. Anorexia Nervosa, like all mental illness, is not recognized by a person's weight or BMI. People who struggle with eating disorders do not fit into a box and come in different shapes and sizes and the medias consistency is blatant sizeism that contributes to misdiagnoses and invalidation of PWD's experiences.

An academy award winning example of this trope is the film *Girl, Interrupted*. The film is an account of one young woman's stay at a mental health facility in the 1960s. The film stars Hollywood icons like Winona Ryder, Angelina Jolie, and Brittany Murphy; all of whom play women with mental illness. The women were from educated, upper middle-class backgrounds.

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<sup>36</sup> Swanson SA, Crow SJ, Le Grange D, Swendsen J, Merikangas KR. Prevalence and correlates of eating disorders in adolescents. Results from the national comorbidity survey replication adolescent supplement.

This could be attributed to the nature of the facility itself, the private Massachusetts mental health clinic was famous for serving clients like Sylvia Plath and James Taylor. This “top-notch” care must have been expensive. While this film was lauded for its portrayal of mental illness and based on the memoir of Susanna Kaysen, it doesn’t detract from the reality that every main character in the film with a mental illness is young, white, attractive, and living comfortable. It doesn’t detract from the reality that this film exemplifies the Crazy, Beautiful trope.

One television program that challenges the Crazy, Beautiful trope in an unconventional way is the Netflix original *Lady Dynamite*<sup>37</sup>. *Lady Dynamite* follows actress and comedienne Maria Bamford as she tries to return to her life and career after both a manic and a depressive episode as a result of Bipolar II. The show is split into three parts, showing the present, her manic episode, and her subsequent depressive episode. This television series is unique because Maria is over 40 years old. She does not fit into the conventions of Hollywood beauty or even American youthful beauty standards. This is regularly addressed throughout the show’s multiple seasons. More so than conventional beauty standards, *Lady Dynamite* is fearless in its portrayal of Bipolar disorder. Showing viewers how much effort, it can take to eat and shower and the consequences of this. The series does not rely on drama or visible emotions to convey to viewers the gravity of mental illness, but instead it uses the disruptions in the everyday. Disruptions in sleep, hygiene, and income are all a reality of mental illness and are all barriers to participating in beauty standards. Further, consistently casting and portraying characters with mental illness as flawlessly or effortlessly beautiful is unrealistic simply because trying to stay beautiful while you’re sick is a lot of hard work.

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<sup>37</sup> *Lady Dynamite*. Created by Pam Brady, Mitchell Hurwitz. Netflix. May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

Looking back to the issue of size and body type in American film and television portrayals of mental illness another recent television program that challenges the archetypal characters associated with the Crazy, Beautiful trope is the CW's *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*<sup>38</sup>. The show follows Rebecca Bunch (played by Rachel Bloom) as she struggles with depression but runs into her childhood crush and is inspired to move to his hometown and integrate herself into his life. Her behavior is not cute or endearing and from an outsider's perspective it can only be interpreted as "crazy". Although it should be noted that the series has been critiqued for using an ableist slur in its title, but this critique falls flat when you realize that the entire show is an analysis of romance, mental illness, and stigma.

The character of Rebecca Bunch breaks the Crazy, Beautiful trope for a few reasons the first, as I mentioned earlier, is her body type. Her body type is much more representative of the American population than is presented to us on most media outlets. More than that, over the course of four seasons, her body weight fluctuates noticeably. This is in no way a criticism but instead a very real part of being a woman living with mental illness. Medication side effects often either come with weight gain or weight loss. Your activity level can change dramatically based on your mood as can your diet. Your sleep cycle and metabolism can all be affected by your mental health. Seeing a character experience the weight fluctuations and not have it be a focal point of the storyline can be incredibly powerful, as many women struggle to continue taking their antidepressants because of the weight gain. Seeing an actress playing a character with mental illness over a period of years and not have their body weight fluctuate makes it difficult for women with mental illnesses to see themselves in the story.

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<sup>38</sup> *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*. Created by Rachel Bloom, Aline Brosh McKenna. CW. October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

The most important questions that need to be asked with regards to this trope are Whose story is being told? and the follow up question to this is Whose story isn't being told? And in the second question is how we can see the ways that the intersections of a person's identity can impact every part of their lives and specifically their mental illness. Their coexisting identities with mental illness impact how they are treated, the access to care they have, the support they receive, and their ability to afford care or continuous care. With limited representations of mental illness this only continues the stigma and misunderstanding around mental illness. Not everyone can afford therapy or has psychiatry covered by their insurance. Not everyone's family supports them or even has the ability to transport them to therapy sessions. But the continued use of the Crazy, Beautiful trope does little to help break the stigma around mental illness or support marginalized communities and marginalized identities.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Disabled Mimicry**

In researching the frequency of able-bodied actors playing disabled roles, I came across the term "cripface". Disabled activists referred to these incidents as "cripface" in reference to both the ableist slur "Crip" (from the term crippled) and Blackface. Blackface is the practice of a white or lighter skinned person darkening their skin, typically with makeup, in order to perform a caricature of a Black stereotype. This practice has deep roots in American history, art, and racism. Perhaps, given both the historical context of the "Crip" and "blackface" there is an inherent appropriative nature when disabled activists use it. Cultural appropriation or

appropriation can be defined as the dominant culture taking something from the minority culture and claiming it as their own.

I first came across the term in a lecture from Disabled Activist and brand ambassador for Global Disability Inclusion, Eileen Grubba. Grubba, a white woman, defined the term for the audience, referencing Blackface of years past. But the reality is Blackface is not a distant memory. Within the 2019 news cycle Blackface has already become a regular topic of debate. A photo from Virginia Governor's, Ralph Northam, yearbook recently surfaced. The photo depicted someone in blackface, and someone dressed as a member of the Ku Klux Klan next to him. Northam has claimed that he is not the person in Blackface, but it does not negate the fact that he included the picture in his yearbook page. Another Blackface controversy that has recently made headlines is that of Florida's Former Secretary of State Michael Ertel. Photos of Ertel in Blackface in 2005 were released in early 2019. In light of the controversy, Ertel resigned from his position. The mixed response to these photographs and debate following them highlight continued public apathy towards blackface.

This apathy can be seen in the term "cripface". Disabled activist Dominic Evans writes in his blog *The Crip Crusader* about why using the term "cripface" is culturally appropriative and offers an alternative term to use "Disabled Mimicry". Evans explains the difference between Disabled Mimicry and Blackface as this "Disabled Mimicry comes from a place where disabled people have no voices because it is often assumed, we cannot speak for ourselves. It comes from a place of ignorance about disability. It comes from people who may think they are doing something good for our community, but who are actually harming it because they have no concept of what our community is or what we believe or represent... Blackface was always

meant to mock and dehumanize black people and therein lies the difference.”<sup>39</sup> But perhaps Evans puts it best when he says “At the heart of this is the fact that black disabled people have asked us to stop the comparison and we need to listen to what they have to say”.<sup>40</sup>

Even something as simple as what to call a trope can bring to light privileges that exist within the disabled community. It takes the trauma of a lived experience to accurately express and communicate these lived experiences. This is why disabled mimicry is so damaging, not only are there limited roles for actors with disabilities, but when actors without disabilities play characters with disabilities, they often misunderstand what living with a disability is like. Actors without disabilities can spend a whole television series or movie focusing on the disability when most people with disabilities are worried about their kids, their significant others (or lack thereof), their jobs, and also what to make for dinner. Actors without disabilities struggle to convey the relationship between working and disability. How having an invisible disability can be a privilege in the hiring process and work place, but a detriment because any necessary accommodations have not been provided. Most persons with disabilities in the united states are far more concerned with their healthcare than their disability itself, but you would not be able to tell that from most American films and television programming.

Very few of the films and television series that I have discussed in previous chapters have actors with disabilities. Or in cases like *Glee* and *Atypical* the main character with a disability is portrayed by an actor without a disability while there are supporting or recurring characters with disabilities played by actors with disabilities. The lack of representation of actors with

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<sup>39</sup> Dominick Evans. “Please Stop Comparing Disabled Mimicry to Blackface. *The Crip Crusader*. July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2017. <https://www.dominickevans.com/2017/07/please-stop-comparing-cripping-up-to-blackface/>

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

disabilities is not unique to this thesis, The Ruderman white paper on employment of actors with disabilities in television conducted a study and found “according to the ADA definition more than 95% of characters with disabilities are being played by able-bodied actors on television”.<sup>41</sup> This common and problematic theme of hiring actors without disabilities to play disabled characters is only further exacerbated by the limited amount of roles available to actors with disabilities.

a 2016 study from Smith, Choueiti, and Pieper with the Media, Diversity, & Social Change Initiative found that “Only 2.4% of all speaking or named characters were shown with a disability. This point statistic is surprising, given 18.7% of the U.S. population reports having a disability”.<sup>42</sup> When roles written for characters with a disability are given to actors without disabilities the small pool of possible roles dries up and leaves an entire population without visible representation on screen. It is important to note here that unlike the Ruderman study, the Annenberg study defined disability differently than the accepted ADA definition. They defined disability as a definition with three major parts “the first was a presence of a condition that affected the form, function or structure of character’s body. Second, the condition led to a current restriction of major life activities or major bodily functions. The third was that the condition and/or restriction was permanent or expected to endure for at least six months. Additionally, addiction was excluded from the present analysis in measurement. By stipulation, celestial beings, the undead, and robots were not allowed to possess a disability”.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Danny Woodburn and Kristina Kopic. *The Ruderman White Paper on Employment of Actors with Disabilities in Television*. Boston. Ruderman Family Foundation. July 2016

<sup>42</sup> Smith et al. *Inequality in 800 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBT, and Disability from 2007-2015*. Annenberg: Annenberg Foundation and USC Annenberg, September 2016.

[https://annenberg.usc.edu/sites/default/files/2017/04/10/MDSCI\\_Inequality\\_in\\_800\\_Films\\_FINAL.pdf](https://annenberg.usc.edu/sites/default/files/2017/04/10/MDSCI_Inequality_in_800_Films_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

Smith et al's definition of disability in their analysis focused heavily on the physical attributes of disability. While this definition does potentially leave out entire populations of people with disabilities, it is important to recognize that actors with invisible disabilities like mental illness or epilepsy have passing privilege in the film industry. Passing privilege comes from the sociological term Passing that states "Passing is the ability of a person to be regarded as a member of a combination of sociological groups other than his or her own, such as a different race, ethnicity, social class, and/or disability status".<sup>44</sup> This privilege allows for them to audition for roles outside of the limited pool of disabled characters and allows them to be considered for roles regardless of their disability status. This does not mean that disability does not impact their day to day lives or that if disclosed or discovered it could impact their employment. It means that those with visible and physical disabilities are disproportionately impacted by actors without disabilities being cast as disabled characters.

There are several arguments as to why actors without disabilities are still being cast in roles for people with disabilities and are participating in disabled mimicry. One of the most common is that it is simply "acting" and that it is an actor's job to breathe life into lived experiences, even if they are not their own. There is some truth in that statement, every actor would be severely limited if they were only able to go for roles that mirrored their lived experiences. We would not have the Marvel or DC universes if actors were only allowed to play different versions of themselves. However, that is precisely what is happening to actors with disabilities, especially visible disabilities. Actors are not being considered for romantic leads or for superheroes. Trevor Noah explained how problematic and harmful continuing to cast persons

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<sup>44</sup>, Daniel G. Renfrow "A Cartography of Passing in Everyday Life," *Symbolic Interaction*. Vol. 27, Issue 4, pp. 485-506; Sanchez, Maria C. *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion*. NYU Press. 2001.

without disabilities in disabled roles is for people with disabilities when he discussed the controversy surrounding Bryan Cranston in the *Upside*<sup>45</sup>. “One actor who is in a wheelchair... wrote a really cogent beautiful response online. Didn’t fight with anybody, didn’t call anybody anything, didn’t judge anybody and he completely opened my eyes to a perspective I never thought of. He said I understand what an actor is. I too am an actor, but I am an actor in a wheelchair and I never see parts that are leading roles for a person in a wheelchair and so he one time I see a role where there’s a person in a wheelchair, I think wow this could be it. This could be the moment where I have all of the tools necessary to play this part. Do I get a shot at playing it?... when you think of it on the flipside, they never call people with wheelchairs in to play able-bodied people and they’ll get able-bodied people to play people in wheelchairs”.<sup>46</sup>

A glaring consequence of hiring people without disabilities to play disabled characters is that actors without disabilities will turn to tired or insulting stereotypes to make up for their lack of lived experience. One example of this is the film *Radio*, where Cuba Gooding Jr. plays an adult man with a developmental disability. His portrayal of a REAL PERSON is nauseating, reductive, and hurtful. Any autonomy the character might have had disappears because Cuba Gooding Jr. has no idea how to convey the intersection of race and disability or age and disability and instead, he spends the entire film refusing to hold eye contact and flailing his body around. Had a person with a disability been able to play that role, there would have been serious changes in the performance and layers of depth would be added.

Actors without disabilities regularly exaggerate symptoms and stereotypes associated with certain disabilities. A classic example of this is characters with autism refusing to hold eye

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<sup>45</sup> *The Upside*. DVD. Directed by Neil Burger. USA: Escape Artists. 2018.

<sup>46</sup> *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*. YouTube. New York: Comedy Central. January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2019

contact with other characters. Difficulty in social situations or understanding social cues is a large part of living with autism but it is not the only part. When actors without disabilities play characters with autism, they regularly hyper fixate on these qualities, despite the fact that autism looks different for nearly every person living with it. Freddie Highmore in ABC's *The Good Doctor*<sup>47</sup>, goes out of his way to exaggerate the way that his character Shaun Murphy, will not hold eye contact. The same can be said for academy award winner Dustin Hoffman in his portrayal of Raymond Babbitt in the critically acclaimed *Rain Man*.<sup>48</sup> Most scenes he's looking the total opposite direction of the camera and the person he is speaking to. Portrayals like these make autism one-dimensional and erase the diversity in the neurodiverse community. They neglect the reality that many people living with autism today have gone through therapy to correct these behaviors or to learn how to be more socially conscious. An example of including neurodiversity on screen is actually from the show *Atypical*.<sup>49</sup> *Atypical* responded to backlash in season one after casting Keir Gilchrist, a person without a disability, in the lead role of a character with a disability, by introducing multiple new cast members who were living with autism. They are all regularly introduced throughout the season in his new group therapy. This showcases the different ways neurodiversity can present itself while not limiting characters and actors to reductive acting tropes. It was also an excellent opportunity for inclusion on the part of the *Atypical* writers.

Perhaps the strongest argument against casting actors with disabilities in disabled roles is purely logistics. Many movies feature characters with disabilities before and after their disability

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<sup>47</sup> *The Good Doctor*. Created by David Shore. ABC. September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>48</sup> *Rain Man*. Directed by Barry Levinson. Performed by Dustin Hoffman, Tom Cruise. United States: United Artists, 1988. DVD.

<sup>49</sup> *Atypical*. Created by Robia Rashid. Netflix. August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

presented itself. The question becomes how do you then get a person with a disability, potentially with limited mobility, to play the “before”? There were critics of the film *The Theory of Everything*<sup>50</sup>, a story of Stephen Hawking’s romance with his first wife because the actor who played Hawking, Eddie Redmayne, did not have a disability. At the same time the film took place over the course of Hawking’s life, he was not always living with a disability. At the time Eddie Redmayne was still a relatively unknown actor, his performance here launched his career in the spotlight, so they were not saving the role for an A-list actor. The film also spent a significant amount of time and money on special and visual effects that ensured that Redmayne appeared as disabled as possible. Could the reverse not have been done for an actor with a disability? We’re in an incredible time in film history where visual effects, animation, and special effects are nearly indistinguishable from real life. Could a body double not have been used for scenes requiring movement or “before”. Could they not spend the same amount of time and energy on editing so that a person with a disability can appear able-bodied instead of the other way around? This argument is for case by case basis, it might not make sense for every film to do so, but the default should not now or ever be able-bodied person playing a character with a disability.

Marlee Matlin was the first actress with a disability to earn an Oscar for her role in *Children of a Lesser God*.<sup>51</sup> The film follows a romance between a teacher at a school for the Deaf and a Deaf woman who graduated. The film is an ongoing conversation about sign language, Deaf inclusion, and ableism. How much of herself, should Sarah have to sacrifice to fit

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<sup>50</sup> *The Theory of Everything*. Directed by James Marsh. Performed by Eddie Redmayne, Felicity Jones. United States: Working Title Production, 2014. DVD.

<sup>51</sup> *Children of a Lesser God*. Directed by Randa Haines. Performed by Marlee Matlin, William Hurt. United States: Paramount Pictures, 1986. DVD.

in with the able-bodied world? And why isn't the able-bodied world working to include her? The film also gives a voice to the Deaf Community, it examines how sign language is not just a tool for communication but a tool for empowerment. By framing the interabled romance as coming from two camps or beliefs, the "lip reading and speaking" camp for mainstreaming Deaf children and the sign language camp. Viewers are allowed to see the ways in which disability can interact with different aspects of one's life and how there is not a clear right answer to something, but a person with a disability should be allowed the same choice and free will as a person without a disability.

The conversation was continued in ABC Family's *Switched at Birth*,<sup>52</sup> which also starred Matlin. The show had a cast full of Deaf actors and incorporated sign language with subtitles for viewers comfort. The show was an ongoing conversation on the benefits and drawbacks of living life with deafness. It challenged many misconceptions surrounding the Deaf community. Most notably, that Deaf people can drive and more than likely drive better than people without disabilities. It was also revolutionary because it was a teen drama. Preteens, teenagers, and young adults were introduced to disability and Deafness as a social construct through a favorite medium done so with ease and nuance. The power that an actor with a disability can have is a careful and accurate portrayal of life with a disability that makes people without disabilities consider how they are interacting with disability or how their own actions impact people living with a disability.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>52</sup> *Switched at Birth*. Created by Lizzy Weiss. ABC Family. June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

When it comes to film and television it important to remember the old adage “you are what you eat”. We have spent years consuming ableist tropes in our media and it has shaped the way that the whole nation interacts with and understands disability. When we continue to allow ableist tropes in our media we are collectively agreeing that ableism is okay. That it is okay to believe that persons with disabilities are one-dimensional and that their lives are inferior to our able-bodied lives. This thinking is dangerous for everyone, disability impacts people regardless of race, class, gender, or sexual orientation. Nearly 20% of the American population is living with a disability. Our films and television should be actively representing our population. But the reality is that “people with disabilities are the most unrepresented minority in Hollywood”.<sup>53</sup> Even with lack of representation, the television screen can be the first or only place an able-bodied person will see a person with a disability or specific disabilities.

If the only time you interact with paralysis is watching people choose death over living with it on screen, when you conceptualize what it means to live with a physical disability, it will never be positive. Smith et al’s study described film and television as a “representational wilderness”<sup>54</sup> for LGBT folks living with a disability. There is virtually no representation for those in that community even though it is not reflective of our populations. But this lack of representation shapes the way we see disability. It dictates whether or not we would pursue a relationship with a person living with a disability and it dictates what we deem as an acceptable interaction between people with disabilities and people without.

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<sup>53</sup> Elizabeth Wagmeister. “Able-Bodied Actors Play 95% of Disabled Characters in Top 10 TV Shows, Says New Study”. *Variety*. July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Smith et al. *Inequality in 800 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBT, and Disability from 2007-2015*. Annenberg: Annenberg Foundation and USC Annenberg, September 2016.

Some of the best programs available right now featuring characters with disability require representation both behind the screen and in front of the screen. ABC's *Speechless*<sup>55</sup> has a creator who grew up with a brother who lived with Cerebral Palsy. This impacted his choice in casting a person with a disability in the lead role and it impacts the portrayal of both the character with a disability and the relatives and friends of the character with a disability. While the show might fall into some tropes itself, it goes out of its way to subvert and challenge preconceived notions of life with a disability, first and foremost that the family is happy and whole.

*Atypical* has a diverse writer's room that after criticism for the first season took that criticism to heart and made an honest attempt at correcting their errors in portraying disability. They were criticized for hiring an actor without a disability and they responded by hiring more actors with disabilities. They were criticized for having the family make most of Sam's choices for him. In the second season they responded by having Sam become for of a fully realized and autonomous character. If the writer's room were not as diverse, would they be able to accept these criticisms in the same way? Would they be able to make the changes necessary to challenge ableism in their program? It is difficult to imagine that they would, because writing rooms that lack diversity have continued to churn out ableist tropes and reductive roles for characters with disabilities.

But having people with a disability in front of the screen can accomplish the same nuance. Actors have the opportunity to tell their story the way that they have lived it. Maria Bamford is not always in the right in her show *Lady Dynamite*<sup>56</sup>, She always a heroine and

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<sup>55</sup> *Speechless*. Created by Scott Silveri. ABC. September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2016.

<sup>56</sup> *Lady Dynamite*. Created by Pam Brady, Mitchell Hurwitz. Netflix. May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

sometimes she hurts the people around her. At the same time, she shows depicts a woman who is truly working hard at making herself better and shows the way that people living with mental illness can be vulnerable to manipulation and abuse. Marlee Matlin does a similar thing by showcasing why a person who is Deaf, likes being Deaf and isn't upset that they cannot hear. Hearing people struggle to understand how a person could ever be content with Deaf and *Switched at Birth*<sup>57</sup> goes out of its way to not only demonstrate how someone could be happy but challenge the ableist idea that they SHOULD be unhappy because they are Deaf.

A way to challenge these harmful tropes effectively is by including people with disabilities in the process of film making. Giving people platform to speak up about how the film could be doing more harm than good, without consequence. When creating a film or television program people of color, women, and the LGBTQIA+ community should be included in the process. Their opinions should be heard and valued throughout the creative process. As a consequence the final product often is more well-rounded, substantial and diverse than the project would have been if their voices had been excluded. The same can and should be said for people living with disabilities. In the social work community, there is a saying “nothing about us, without us, is for us” and that can be directly applied to disability in film and television. If people with disabilities are not involved in the creation process of your film or television program, at step of the way, your film about a character with a disability is not for people with disabilities. More than likely it is to make able-bodied viewers more comfortable. Writers, producers, actors, and directors all have the ability to address ableism in film and television, but

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<sup>57</sup> *Switched at Birth*. Created by Lizzy Weiss. ABC Family. June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

the choice lies in them if they will allow it to continue or if they will attempt to call out ableism around us.

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