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The Ableist Gaze and Disability Trauma: How Onscreen Representation Erases the Truth

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Introduction

From the time I was a small child, I’ve always had a love for film and tv series. I remember being in elementary school and sneaking in episodes of *Hannah Montana* and *The Suite Life of Zack* whenever I could. It was my escape from reality and I often pretended to have conversations with my favorite characters. While it was often the light in my darkness, I was often searching for a specific type of comfort I could never really get my finger on and, looking back, these films probably did more harm than good for me.

I have Cerebral Palsy. According to the Mayo Clinic website, Cerebral Palsy “[...] is a group of disorders that affect movement and muscle tone or posture. It’s caused by damage that occurs to the immature brain as it develops, most often before birth.” Cerebral Palsy is a commonly misunderstood disability, partly because it looks different on everybody. I can walk, but sometimes use a wheelchair for energy. I can type, but extremely slowly. As a kid, I had to wear leg braces and a helmet and use a walker. You can probably imagine that I didn’t fit it and it took a toll on me just as it would with any other kid.

Cerebral Palsy and disability look different on everyone. Despite knowing other disabled children, I still felt alone. I was always too disabled or not disabled enough. So, if I couldn’t see myself in real life, I could at least see myself in films and television to bring myself some peace and comfort, right? Well, that is where things get complicated. Disability representation is sparse and the stuff that is there varies in accuracy and harmfulness. Here is the deal: most disability representation is created by nondisabled artists which takes away the power of the representation because in reality, our oppressors or telling our story to us and for us which presents an entire host of problems.
While it’s great that disability stories are being told, they must be told in a way that is helpful and uplifting to disabled people and not harmful for disabled people. While I did have a small handful of disability stories as a child I used to comfort myself with, I wonder what messages I actually internalized from them. They tell disabled people just to slap a smile on their face and keep going despite all of the hardships they go through which sounds nice on the surface, but is actually abuse and emotional gaslighting. These aren’t by accident. By design such “comforting” representations uphold the ableist and oppressive systems we have in place. There are two main objectives here. One, to keep disabled people quiet and ‘content’ about their oppression. And two, have the nondisabled view of disabled people be in a very fragile state of hating their existence, but praising them for doing simple things such as getting a job or following their passions.

While subpar representation has been a topic of the conversation within the disabled community for some time now and the effects it has on disabled people, there isn’t enough conversation surrounding how such representations affect disabled people’s mental health and self-image. While it may seem like disability representation is better these days, I want to explain why that is a veiled attempt just to produce more ableist propaganda with the same underlying messages. I would like to be part of that conversation and use literary analysis and media criticism as a tool for not only personal reflection as a disabled person, but to form a hypothesis surrounding the evolution of disability representation.

As I said before, I had a few comforting disability representations as a child and a teenager. But looking back on them now, they make my stomach churn with anger and shame. I now understand that these films weren’t even meant for me. They were meant for a nondisabled audience. I have to look no further than the messages in the films to understand that. At first
glance, these films are filled with messages of hope and overcoming the odds to reach the character’s goals. But, with further analysis, they taught me that I wasn’t allowed to complain about my disability or any of the hardships that might come from it. I emotionally gaslit myself into thinking that I wasn’t stressed out and exhausted from my disability and if I was, I was doing something wrong or just having a bad attitude about things and should just snap out of it.

This couldn’t be further from the truth. I have every single right to complain about living in a body that never works with me and being trapped in a world that doesn’t want me here in the first place and does everything in their power to make sure I’m aware of that. I fight an uphill battle on a daily basis and some days just suck. And that’s perfectly okay. Disability is anything but stress free.

It wasn’t until I watched Netflix’s *Special* that I truly saw myself reflected back at me on screen and it completely changed my life and how I viewed myself, my Cerebral Palsy, and the world around me. *Special* is a Netflix series based on Ryan O’Connell’s 2015 autobiography, *I’m Special: And Other Lies We Tell Ourselves*. The first season aired in 2019 and the second season aired in 2021, each with 8 episodes. O’Connell has mild Cerebral Palsy and created, wrote, ran the creative vision and operations for, executively produced, and starred in the show. It tells the story of Ryan Hayes, a 28-year-old gay man with Cerebral Palsy who breaks out of his shell to build the life he wants for himself. He moves out, he gets an internship and a best friend, he hooks up with guys, he drinks and cusses, he fights with his mom and his boyfriend, he gets annoyed at work. Because it was written and acted by an actual disabled person, the disabled character is able to go through trauma and emotionally react without the narrative conventionally punishing him or him clearly being in the wrong. One of the main themes of the series is the ableism he faces on a daily basis and the toll it takes on his mental health. Throughout the series,
Ryan faces abuse from his boss, discrimination from dating parents, and being sexually and emotionally fetishized on multiple occasions, along with plenty of other stuff. It seems like Ryan can’t catch a break and as someone who constantly feels that way, it is extremely comforting to see that reflected back at me without the show slapping me on the wrist telling me it’s wrong or saying I should use my trauma to be stronger and positive. For the first time, I felt validated in not only my Cerebral Palsy, but the trauma surrounding it.

In this project, I use *Special* as the primary source and the building blocks for this critical studies of media and my developing theoretical research. Through the lens of *Special* and my experience as a disabled person, I apply literary analysis to different examples of disability representation and explain the underlying messages and how they help or hurt disabled people. Moving on from that, I then reflect on my first viewing of *Special* and how it transformed me as a person; While it was extremely therapeutic and healing for me, it was also retraumatizing and hard to swallow. This leads into a section about the toll ableism has on disabled people and how our oppressors emotionally gaslight us into suppressing these feelings for the sake of holding up the ableism in our society.

In the final part of this project, I will be presenting an original hypothesis about the evolution of disability representation and how it is just an updated way of viewing disabled people as burdens on society and their loved ones.

**Part One- Text Analysis**

In this section, I will be analyzing four different disability focused texts from the lens of a disabled person’s point of view.
I grew up in a world that told me that I had to go above and beyond just to be accepted into society. One of my favorite movies when I was growing up was *Front of the Class* (2008), a movie about a guy with Tourette’s Syndrome who ‘overcomes’ his disability and becomes a teacher. The movie paints Brad as loving to teach people and talk about his Tourette’s Syndrome. While this may be the experience of some disabled people, the movie completely glosses over the emotional labor disabled people have to perform on a daily basis.

One scene that burns in the back of my mind is when Brad and his brother, Jeff, go golfing to get Brad’s mind off of a possible job offer and a worker asks him to leave the premises. Jeff tries to defend his brother, but Brad says “I can’t help making these noises because I have Tourette’s. It’s a neurological disorder. I’d love to tell you about it.” While some other golfers tell the workers that they aren’t bothering them and even invite him to join them, Brad decides to not make a fuss and just go.

When the two brothers are walking to the car, Jeff asks how Brad can stand living in a world with so many ignorant people and Brad tells Jeff to just focus on the guys who stood up for Brad. The two boys then just joke around and race each other to the car.

Everything about this scene gives me a giant headache. It re-enforces the narrative of disabled people having to be grateful for the scraps we get and showing our gratitude by dancing like circus animals on command. This scene tells disabled people like me that we don’t deserve to relax and forget our stress, even for a bit, unless we perform the role of super crip and please our abusers.

This is a typical trope with disability media where the disabled character is the background character, only there to inspire and teach their loved ones and the audience. This
trope has been around for decades at this point. The disabled person who works hard to ‘overcome’ their disability. When life knocks us down over and over again, we get back up. No matter how many times life knocks us down, no matter how hard we fall. If we don’t, we perform a moral failure.

We take the high road every time with a smile on our face. When Brad is going on his interviews, he has an interview with a principal who says that the students at the school are troubled students who will be distracted by his noises and tics. The principal goes further, saying Brad would have to refrain from making noises in class if he wanted to work in the school. After that, Brad walks out mid-interview and has an anxiety attack in his car. He is beaten down and exhausted at this point. At this point, he has been on multiple interviews where he was judged and discarded because of his Tourette’s Syndrome. Later that night, he is ranting to his mom on the phone. His mom asks him if he wants to move back home and “throw in the towel.” She also says that it sounds like he’s letting his Tourette’s win. This is viewed as empowering. These words help Brad get the courage to get back on his feet and push him to work even harder and get his job. This scene absolutely infuriates me.

I don’t know whether I should blame Brad’s mom for borderline gaslighting her son while he is trying to rant about his valid frustrations surrounding ableism and his disability or blame the society that tells parents to teach their disabled children to push through each adversity thrown their way with a smile on their face and not a complaint passing their lips.

Throughout the movie, it’s shown that Brad’s father is unsupportive. He tells Brad to stop his ticks as a kid, urges him to give up on trying to find a teaching job, and is overall dismissive. The movie never uses the word ableism, but it’s clearly ableism. It gets to the point where Brad doesn’t answer his father’s phone calls and avoids seeing him when he can. While Brad’s dad
does come around towards the movie and tries to support his son, it’s his mom who is shown to be the supportive one. She fights for his rights when he is young, frequently calls him on his phone, and invites him and his girlfriend to family thanksgiving.

But there are a few scenes in the movie where she is more dismissive than supportive. During Thanksgiving, Brad tells his girlfriend that he loves her for the first time during a stolen moment between the two. Later that night, Brad is ranting to his mom about his fears of his girlfriend leaving him due to his Tourette’s Syndrome. This is my favorite scene in the movie. It’s quiet and melancholy as it should be. Brad is really in love with this woman and he doesn’t want to lose her. It’s a much too common fear for disabled people. He bangs the table and cries over the fear of losing someone that clearly means a lot to him. His mom tries to soothe him while rubbing his arm. After he expresses his fear of either of them getting hurt, his mom tells him, “The only thing that could hurt either of you is if you let Tourette’s drive her away. If you let it win.”

How can a disabled person let their disability win? I think she was talking about the fear of the situation, but I would argue that it’s not much better. Disabled people deserve to be able to express -- and even more importantly to have validated -- their negative emotions surrounding their disability.

**Margarita with a Straw**

In 2016’s *Margarita with a Straw*, the main character, Laila, is a bisexual Indian woman with Cerebral Palsy who moves to America for the first time to attend college. There, she meets a woman there that is a gay, blind woman of color and they start a loving relationship together until Laila cheats on her.
While I was overjoyed to see not just a woman with Cerebral Palsy express sexual feelings, but a queer woman with Cerebral Palsy do that, the context around it made me want to scream. I think this scene was supposed to be played off as a cute, little joke but I don’t find it funny at all. Having people not listen to me and my needs, and further thinking they know my needs better, is a massive trigger for me. But we all know it’s okay when it’s a hot, white guy who violates the rights of marginalized folks. Nothing ever goes wrong when that happens, right?

In a scene later in the movie, Laila goes over to the guy’s house to study and have him ‘help’ with her homework. Frankly, it’s a punch in the face as someone with Cerebral Palsy who works day and night to be the best I can and to prove to the world that I can ‘overcome’ Cerebral Palsy.

But I would be more than okay if she would just go over to a friend’s house to study and chill without lying to him. I think it would be so cool to just show a disabled person ‘working’ with a group of friends and shoot the shit with them. It’s the fact that a) she’s lying to this guy about how capable she is and b) she’s doing this while she has a live-in girlfriend. It’s healthy to have friendships outside of your significant other when the friendships are built on trust and honesty. The scene turns from uncomfortable to downright creepy when Laila has to use the bathroom and needs help from the guy with transferring.

After Laila finishes, the guy goes to help pull up her pants when he gets turned on by her. The next scene cuts to him on top of her in the bed. For a solid moment, I wondered if this scene was even consensual. Thankfully, it is, but it doesn’t make the scene any less uncomfortable.

While it’s not clearly stated, this scene could be read as a disability fetish. Disability fetish is when a person sexually objectivifies someone’s disability. It can be very dehumanizing
and very demoralizing for disabled people. This happens to all marginalized groups. The term is devotee and it can be a real gray area.

Devotees are people who are turned on by disability. Certain aspects of disability, such as amputation, paralysis, and muscle weakness, and atrophy appear sexually desirable to people who enjoy the fetish (Vice.com). While devotees may look innocent enough on the surface, it quickly takes a creepy and sometimes, abusive turn.

There are three kinds of devotees that are unhealthy no matter what. There is the entitled, the desperate, and the insecure. The entitled devotee thinks they deserve whatever they want including answers to inappropriate questions, sex, and whatever they want. They start off as ’the nice guy’ and then reveal toxic behavior when they don’t get what they want. All women, disabled or not, have dealt with these kinds of men and often give in to the demands because they don’t know what will happen if they said no. Both disabled men and non-disabled men act like this. Most devotees are not entitled, but the ones who are more than make sure that their voices are heard loud and clear.

The desperate devotee comes on to disabled people way too strong. They find a single target and zero in on them. They will do anything and everything to get their hands on what they want. They will love-bomb, stalk, and whoo their way into their way into their target’s heart. They only care about their feelings and don’t care about the feelings of their targets.

The insecure devoted are often ashamed of their disability fetish because of not only society’s ableism, but also their own ableism. The world views disability as ugly and unsexy. Often when a disabled person is with an insecure devotee, the devotee will be avoidant of the disability or hyper fixated on it.
If I would guess, I would think that the guy in the movie is probably an insecure devotee since he doesn’t come off as overbearing until we cut to the bedroom scene. I also think it’s important to mention that more than 80 percent of disabled women are victims of sexual assault. Having a scene like this in a movie that is supposed to empower women like this is absolutely disgusting.

I want to talk about Laila cheating on her girlfriend outside of the context of it being dubious consent and I don’t want to victim blame her. I’m only bringing it up because the movie frames it as Laila cheating on her girlfriend. I and a lot of people absolutely hate the trope of cheating in fiction and it’s not hard to see why. It’s going out of your way to harm the person that is supposed to trust you more than anyone in this world. How am I supposed to root to a character and see myself in them if they do something that is one of my biggest... I don’t even want to call it a pet peeve because of how serious it is. It also plays into the stereotype of bisexual people, particular bisexual women, being unfaithful and unfaithful in relationships.

This movie's production context may help explain why it goes wrong in its representation. An Indian bisexual woman named Shonali Bose had a cousin with Cerebral Palsy and she felt like she had to tell the story of Cerebral Palsy. In an interview, Bose said “What’s the point of having a film-maker in the family if you can’t get them to make a film about cerebral palsy?” (Guardian). She also states that she wanted to have disabled actresses, but there were no disabled actresses willing to do the sex scenes (Cultural Daily). While the sex scenes are important to the film, disabled actresses are as important, if not more important. While it’s clear that there was a lot of passion and drive behind this film, my concerns overwhelm the good parts. One of my main concerns about the movie is the biphobia and the fetishization of disabled women.
Reading interviews with Bose shows she probably had the best intentions in mind. She wanted to get it right and my heart aches as I say this, but I don’t think she did. While it’s very important for stories of Cerebral Palsy, it’s important that those stories are told by people with Cerebral Palsy. I wanted to connect with Laila so bad when watching this movie so badly, it almost hurt. But throughout the movie, I felt this utter disconnect from her, and my stomach churned the whole time. Things turned from uncomfortable to horrible with the sex scene. While I want to give the movie the benefit of the doubt for Bose’s good intentions and the push to representation of Cerebral Palsy sexuality onscreen, I can’t overlook the glaring harm this movie does to not only the Cerebral Palsy community, but the bisexual community as well.

**Speechless**

*Speechless* premiered on ABC broadcasting for three seasons from 2016 to 2019 for a total of 63 episodes. Scott Silveri, who was a producer on *Friends*, created, executively produced, and wrote it. The show is about a family of five and the eldest son, named James Junior or JJ, has Cerebral Palsy and they move to a new school district to hopefully get the accommodations he needs. Michah Fowler who plays JJ also has Cerebral Palsy, but his is more mild than JJ’s. JJ is unable to walk or talk; he uses a communication board which someone has to read for him. The show follows the entire family while they try to juggle JJ’s Cerebral Palsy and their own lives. Silveri has an older brother with Cerebral Palsy and had always wanted to bring a family like his to the screen (Easterseals). All 3 seasons came out when I was in high school and I watched new episodes every week on ABC. It was good, but more often than not, it left me with a weird feeling. I often couldn’t relate to it past surface level. Looking back, it makes me feel like a burden to my family because the show centers on how hard it is to take care of JJ and
how it takes a toll on everyone else, even more than JJ. Silveri has also called the project deeply personal to him (The Wrap.) The show is mostly told from the point of view of JJ’s mom and brother and often paints JJ as either carefree when it comes to his Cerebral Palsy or an immature child who pouts until he gets his way.

One of the biggest problems of the show is how it frames disability trauma. It’s framed as a funny, teachable moment for the non-disabled audience. An example of this is the eighteenth episode of the first season, D-I-DING, where the family goes to the grocery store. When JJ and his family enter the store, like 2 people jokingly ask, “Do you have a license for that thing?” and he and his sister, Dyland make a bet about how many people will ask him that throughout the day.

I want to relate to this scene so much. I want to feel JJ’s pain and give him an “aw, buddy!” with sympathetic eyes, but I can’t because as someone with, I know this scene was not created for me. This scene and the whole show was created for non-disabled people to go, “Oh, look. That seems kind of annoying and funny. Disabled people rolling their eyes at ableism is so cute. I would never do that! I’m such a good disability ally.”

While JJ is at the meat counter, a businessman drops his shopping list before taking JJ’s joystick and moving him out of the way before grabbing a spice on the top shelf. This is one of the only two times I get close to sympathizing with JJ, cause one of my biggest triggers is people touching me and/or my chair.

JJ’s response to this is petty and makes a mockery of disabled trauma. Instead of telling his parents, he decides to follow the guy around the store and get in the man’s way multiple times and take all the jelly so he can’t buy a can of it. At the end of the episode, an employee comes over and helps read his communication board. He explains to the man that if he treats him
like an object in his way, he’s going to act like an object in his way. After that the employee asks, “So… do you have a license for that thing?” And JJ ‘says,’ “You’re damn right.”

While humor is a healthy coping mechanism and one I use on a daily basis, it comes off a mockery here because there were no disabled writers and the jokes are more aimed at a nondisabled audience so they can give themselves a pat on the back for being a good ally and not asking disabled people annoying questions. They are able to tell themselves, “As long as I don’t ask a wheelchair user if they have a license for it or clap for a disabled person just living their life and going to school, I’m not ableist, right?”

The pilot is almost unwatchable for me. JJ is going to a mainstream school for the first time and is going to get a Personal Care Attendant. While JJ was hoping to get a cool guy to help him, he actually gets a middle aged woman with an annoying, squeaky voice who wants to call him J-Tizzy. Don’t think about that too long if you don’t want to puke.

At first, JJ is annoyed and worried about this woman, like any disabled teen would be. But, by dinner time, JJ is joking that her voice sounds like a fairy godmother and keeps asking her to turn people into pumpkins.

This is also on the same day that his entire class stands up and claps for him just for going to school. They also want him to run for class president just because he’s just so fucking inspiring.

When JJ gets to class, a guy comes up to JJ with a huge yellow poster that says, “JJ for president.” The teacher says, “‘Zachary’s cousin is deaf, so he gets it.” Do they know how hypocritical they are? Or are they totally oblivious? Mind you, this episode was written by a room filled by non-disabled people.
For me, a day like this would be downright traumatizing and might even trigger a panic attack. To see JJ and the show treat it like a joke feels like a huge punch in the face for me. The episode ends with JJ getting a cooler PCA (who becomes his PCA for the rest of the show) and announcing that he is, in fact, running for class president. There is no weight to JJ’s pain and trauma because if there was, it wouldn’t serve its purpose as a feel good show for non-disabled people.

One of the biggest differences between *Special* and *Speechless* is that while *Special* was created by an actual disabled person, *Speechless* was created by someone whose brother had Cerebral Palsy. While *Speechless* has many shortcomings, the shortcoming I want to focus on is the “Hollywood happy ending” of each episode, especially for JJ. JJ is popular and often seen hanging out with the cool kids. All of the kids look up to him and view him as an inspiration. JJ is almost always at ease, especially in public. It’s lowkey inspiration porn and we never get to see his struggle with the stress of Cerebral Palsy or ableism or anything like that (Martin).

I liked *Speechless* when I watched it in high school, but I couldn’t relate to it past a surface level and there were multiple times where I would finish an episode with a weird feeling in my stomach. It’s clear that this show is not meant for me and other disabled adults. It’s for caregivers and people who want to feel good about disability without thinking about the ableism rooted in our society and not only the physical challenges that come with being disabled, but also the mental and emotional trauma we have from trying to live in a world that wants us to be dead. If JJ doesn’t have to drag his exhausted body after a stressful day of ableism and overworking himself, the abled audience doesn’t have to think about the actual disabled people who do.
“Sorry, hon. Cedars-Sinai is around the corner,” is the first thing the editor-in-chief of Eggwoke, Olivia Ross, tells the new intern when he walks into the staff meeting on his first day. While this is a cruel thing to say or even assume, it’s not as random as one might think. The new intern is Ryan Hayes, a 28 year old gay man with mild Cerebral Palsy. On his first day, his boss assigns him to mail duty. While this would be a simple task for an abled intern, it’s stressful and humiliating for him. Through the envelope scene in the first episode of 2019’s Special, Ryan O’Connell highlights the emotional stress of disabled people through day-to-day life struggles, ableism, and the emotional labor that’s expected of disabled people without a second thought.

Throughout Ryan’s first day of his job, he is faced with multiple ableist comments from his boss. Going back to the Cedars-Sinai comment, Ryan is immediately profiled as the disabled intern. Even before Ryan has a chance to introduce himself to everyone, his boss assumes that he is a confused, slow disabled person who can’t even find his own way to the hospital. The uphill battle is started within the first ten seconds of his internship. Disabled workers such as Ryan and myself have to go above and beyond just to get a foot in the door. While this comment from Olivia is harmful enough, it’s only the first ableist comment of the day and far from the end of the workplace ableism he has to deal with on his first day.

Because of his Cerebral Palsy, Ryan struggles to open the envelopes and ends up ripping not only the envelopes, but also the contents in them. With the encouragement of Kim, his coworker, he goes to lunch to take a break and to take care of himself. When they get back from lunch, Ryan stops dead in his tracks with his mouth wide open. The camera then pans to Olivia who is holding the envelope. Again, even before Ryan can say anything, Olivia snaps at him by asking, “Did Edward Sissorhands open my mail? What is wrong with you?”
Instead of getting justifiably angry, Ryan apologizes to his boss and explains that he knows how to open mail and he just has a dexterity issue. While this scene is played for laughs on the surface, Ryan’s emotions and reaction give it a traumatic undertone. The whole conversation is reminiscent of an abuse victim apologizing to their abuser. Ableism is a form of oppression and oppression is a form of violence. At the moment, Ryan is having violence performed against him, something he’s all too familiar with. He doesn’t speak up because of two reasons: One, like an abuse victim, which he is, he is paralyzed with fear when he is talking to Olivia. This is a common thing for abuse victims. Throughout the first season, Ryan is always on edge around his boss. Two, he knows how much he needs this job and if he stands up for himself, he doesn’t know what will happen. Will he get fired? Will he be forced to write about his Cerebral Palsy?

The stress of ableism and the trauma that disabled people experience are barely discussed and almost never discussed when our stories are told; mainly because our stories are told by abled people. Most of these stories use the medical model of disability (197, Davis). More often than not the disabled character gets their happy ending when they get ‘cured’ of their disability.

*Special* only uses the social model of disability in its storyline. Ryan never learns how to open envelopes because he doesn’t need to so that he can advance as a writer. At least, he shouldn’t have to. The social model of disability tells us Ryan can do what he wants to do in life much easier with simple things like office accommodations and less hiring discrimination.

Ryan goes into his internship thinking that he was going to write Onion-esque humor and satire pieces. But in his first meeting, Olivia tells him Eggwoke is now focused on confessional essays such as ‘50 ways to hate myself’ or ‘Why do I keep finding things in my vagina?’ Ryan quickly connects the dots and realizes that he will probably have to write about his private life to
perform well at Eggwoke and a huge part of his private life is his Cerebral Palsy. He hasn’t told anyone about his disability yet, which is completely his right. Later that day when Ryan is home ‘after’ work and practicing opening envelopes, his mom suggests that he writes about his Cerebral Palsy, and he responds by saying,

“No! Write about CP? Mom, you don’t get it. My whole life, CP has been like the main course, when it just needs to be like an appetizer. Or better yet, just taken off the menu altogether.”

His tone of voice, the look on his face, and his body face says it all. It’s the last thing on Earth he probably wants to write about. Which is completely understandable. Throughout the entire season, the audience gets to see all the emotional stress Ryan goes through.

The next day, Ryan goes into work ready to write about his Cerebral Palsy, despite him being a bit nervous to, saying it’s “personal and for [him] to talk about.” While this seems like a plot hole at first, I would argue the opposite.

Ryan is 28 in the show and Eggwoke is but the latest of many unpaid internships. One of his main goals in the show is to start his career as a writer. He comes to the conclusion that he has to write about his Cerebral Palsy, one of the most traumatic aspects of his life, just to ‘do well’ at his internship and hopefully get a paid position, either at Eggwoke or at a different company.

If Ryan was to write about his Cerebral Palsy everyday for Eggwoke, regardless of whether or not he would want to, it would take a serious toll on his physical and emotional health. Even though disabled people such as myself want to tell our own story, it does take a toll on us. It’s a delicate balance that is barely discussed. Disabled people not only need to be given
the opportunity to tell our own stories, we need the space to tell our stories the way we want to without the fear of abled people giving us backlash, abuse, or ableist restrictions.

An ableist boss who expects free emotional labor is only the start of daily stressors Ryan has to deal with surrounding his Cerebral Palsy. The show has little moments that show Ryan struggling with simple tasks most people take for granted such as squeezing behind his coworkers to get to his chair in the conference room and standing up from a bench in a restaurant with a person on the other end. To a non-disabled viewer, these small annoyances might be just that, small annoyances. And sometimes they are. But they add up. They take a toll, not just physically, but emotionally.

Instead of going home and recovering from the stress of the day, Ryan goes home and practices opening mail. His mom urges him to take a break saying that he doesn’t need to learn how to. Ryan responds by saying, “Yes, I do. My boss already thinks something’s wrong with me because I can’t do basic shit like open mail.”

Ryan knows that the world is made for disabled people to fail. He knows that he has to work twice as hard to get half as far. I have always had to, as well. A task that takes an non-disabled person half an hour to complete will take me hours. I work seven days a week for 8 to 12 hours. If I’m not working, I’m sleeping. If I’m not sleeping, I’m working. While I love writing and learning, it’s not the main reason that I rarely give myself time to just rest and breathe.

The day Ryan had at Eggwoke would make anyone want to lay on the couch, nodding in and out of sleep with the TV playing in the background and Ryan more than deserves to. But, he knows he won’t get anywhere with his feet up and his eyes half closed.
While this scene would be framed as inspirational and ‘brave’ from an non-disabled gaze. But, *Special* shows a disabled man overworking himself as what it actually is; stressful, exhausting, humiliating, and traumatic. Disabled people have enough to deal with. Society needs to stop gaslighting us for using our personal time to relax and not be super-crip for a few short moments.

**Part Two- Seeing Myself Reflected Back at Me**

While it was extremely comforting to finally see myself reflected back at me, it was also extremely triggering. I will never forget the night I saw season one of *Special*. When I first heard about a Netflix having a show about a gay guy with the Cerebral Palsy, I automatically assumed it would be bad. It was a week after I saw Sia’s *Music* and I remember telling myself, “Please let this be funny bad and not give me a panic attack bad. I was so surprised when I found out that not only was it good, but exactly what I needed. For the first time in my life, I was able to see myself, not just on screen, but ever.

I just sat there that night and watched the entire season and just was overwhelmed with how accurate the show was. I cried three different times during the last two episodes and by the end, I was exhausted and my mind was racing. The show stayed with me for months and made me question everything I thought I knew about my disability.

From the time I was a young child, I was brainwashed into thinking that I should view my disability as a superpower, as a blessing. If I complain about it, I have performed a moral failure and a character failure. I am being a ‘bad’ disabled person.
The abuse and oppression that disabled people face as well as facing medical challenges can result in guilt, shame, rage, and anger. People always say that disabled people are a burden to take care of and once a person hears that for long enough, they start to believe it. We see how exhausted our loved ones are from taking care of us and it kills us. But no one seems to talk about how exhausting it is for us to survive in a world that wants us dead and tries everything in their power to make that possible.

This leads us to question ourselves whenever we have any negative feelings surrounding our disabilities for whatever reason. We have to emotionally gaslight ourselves to believe that we are just overreacting and we are only feeling this way because we are angry just because we want to be angry or we want something we don’t deserve.

Watching *Special* for the first time was truly a transformative experience for me. All my life I’ve heard that I should be happy about my disability and if I have any negative feelings about it, it’s a moral failing on my part. Did I have multiple painful surgeries as a child? Sure. Were some people mean to me? Yes. it didn’t matter. If I complained, I was in the wrong. It wasn’t until I watched Special and did some self reflection that I had trauma connected to my Cerebral Palsy and I was actually abused by a society that wanted me dead.

By the last episode, Ryan is trying to keep it all together but is cracking under the stress of hiding his Cerebral Palsy. In one scene, Karen Skypes Ryan, and before Ryan answers we get to see his computer screen and he’s Googling internalized ableism. I actually cried at this part. The scene was even more heartbreaking the second time I watched it. Not only is he Googling internalized ableism, but he’s doing it alone, in his bedroom with no one to comfort him. He’s literally on not only the phone but a freaking video call with his mom, the one person in his life who’s supposed to comfort and understand him the most. It would be so easy just to say, “Hey,
Mom, I’ve been struggling with some stuff.” But, again, I’m painfully aware of how difficult it is to talk to loved ones about some parts of being disabled.

I actually remember sitting at my desk with my headphones on bawling at this scene with my family sitting six feet away from me watching tv. It was surreal how life imitated art in that moment. What was I supposed to tell my family? That I just realized that everything I knew about my disability was a giant pile of lies and I’m discovering this through a Netflix show with swearing, drinking, and sex every five minutes. I didn’t have the words for it. I just had to assure them everything was okay with tears probably rolling down my cheeks.

While watching Special can be extremely healing for me, it can also be retraumatizing at times. Realizing that I have trauma surrounding my disability is a slow, painful process that I am still going through. It sends chills down my spine and stops me dead in my tracks.

Part of me wishes that I was just overreacting and making a big deal out of nothing. That would mean things aren’t as bad as I imagined them to be and everything can be fixed with an attitude adjustment and some self discipline.

But, that’s not our reality. Things are just as bad as I think they are, if not worse. I only know what I know and I don’t even think I’ve uncovered even a fourth of all the horrors that come with living as a disabled person. I can no longer live in denial. I have trauma surrounding my Cerebral Palsy and I don’t even know where to heal because I still go through it on a daily basis.

Part Three- Disabled People and Mental Health
I’ve seen multiple ‘inspirational’ scenes of disabled people overworking themselves to ‘overcome’ their disability and when I watch them back, it feels like an abuser telling me I’m not working hard enough even though I’m doing 40 thousand things. And over the years, disabled people such as Ryan and myself internalize the abuse, the trauma, and the ableism.

There is this myth of disabled people being strong and their disability is what makes them strong. This is only half true. Disabled people aren’t strong because of our disabilities, we are strong because we have to be in the world that wants us dead. Because the world isn’t built for us, we have to learn how to adapt from a very young age. We have to be strong just to survive and exist. If we want to have a ‘normal’ life or go after the life we want, we have to work overtime in every aspect of our lives.

We have to go to our emotionally draining jobs, get yelled by our ableist bosses, and then, go home and work until we barely can drag ourselves to be just to do it again the next day in hopes of one day being able to not have to constantly work and be under a giant pile of stress, trauma, and exhaustion.

At this point, I believe calling a disabled person inspirational is an act of violence and abuse. It's rooted in eugenics and is often code for phrases such as, "If I was disabled, I'd KILL myself" or "Disabled people don't deserve to live.” or even “Ha! Ha! At least I’m not that retard! Her life sucks!”Here’s the thing, calling disabled people inspirational isn't about disabled people. It's about non-disabled people feeling good about themselves. It’s either "I’d rather be dead than disabled” or "Look at me!! I'm such a good person for taking the cripple to prom."

Second of all, it objectifies and demoralizes us to be viewed and treated as nothing more than children or animals who can only do basic things. If we do something even remotely cool or awesome, such as holding down a job or starting a family, we are seen as superstars. It's like
clapping for a toddler learning to walk. We are just trying to live our lives without being gawked at like animals at a zoo.

It has also been used to kind of erase disability. It's going against disabled people’s wishes and using terms such as differently abled or special needs. In a lot of people’s minds, a disabled person is someone sitting in a group home, watching reruns of Full House or the relative no one really wants to take care of. It isn't a college senior working hard to build the life she wants. They're uncomfortable with disability and don’t like to talk about it. If a disabled person is inspirational, nondisabled people don’t have to talk about disability issues and ableism. If disabled people are doing inspirational, amazing, awesome things, there is no reason to make life easier or even more bearable for them. When it comes to ableism, it makes it seem ‘not too bad’ or even moral.

On a personal level, it's really triggering and stressful for me. I present as the 'super warrior crip' who is always amazing and always on top of it. I feel like when someone is calling me 'inspirational' all I hear is, "Prove to me you're worthy of my love." I feel like they have an image in their head that I feel like I'll never be able to live up to.

I feel the pressure to be amazing and be perfect. Never let them see me sweat! It’s worse when non-disabled people call us inspirational for doing things for pleasure such as video games and make-up. When it comes to something I want to enjoy just for myself and sometimes my loved ones, I don't want to be inspirational. I just want to be me and have somewhere I can relax and not be super crip. Video games are something I do to relax and forget the super crip warrior girl. It sends the message that, “Your life isn’t for you. Your life is for me.”

Another part of inspiration porn is how happy disabled people are in it and that sends the message that disabled people always happy and deals with whatever happens to them with a
smile on there face and never complain. This is seen as moral and if disabled people don’t do it, they are seen as selfish and ungrateful. This isn’t by accident. It’s a way of gaslighting and silencing disabled people. They are saying, “You should be happy just to be here. You should be happy that we don’t murder you or throw you in a situation to rot. What else could you want?”

In reality, being disabled is far more than the carefree, inspirational fairytale it’s commonly portrayed of. A 2018 study conducted by Kimberly Smith found that adults with Cerebral Palsy have a higher risk of anxiety and depression. Some causes that were found were chronic pain, mobility issues, poor sleep, and lack of social interaction. While all these reasons are valid and things I have personally endured, the study glossed over what effect living in an ableist society has on a disabled person’s mental health.

I had every right to be angry and exhausted and I am. I’m ashamed of those feelings because they feel dirty to me, but how could I not be when I have to fight everyday just to survive? I’m slowly accepting that these are healthy responses to trauma and abuse. Our oppressors have stigmatized these emotions to take the blame off them. If disabled people are happier and stronger for overcoming hardships, what would be the point of changing anything? The problem is with us, not them, so why do they need to change?

This is classic abusive behavior. The abuser will blame the victim if they complain or suffer due to the abuse. It keeps the victim quiet and compliant. Complaining about my disability is an act of rebellion and resistance. And they know it. Our oppressors know all of this. It’s why disabled people’s complaints are either silenced or demonized.

Living as a disabled person in an ableist world means we’re constantly in survival mode and it takes a serious toll on us. Self care and resistance can only do so much. How can we heal
from our trauma if we’re being traumatized on a daily basis? The only way disabled people can truly heal is if we live in an environment we are able to heal in.

**Part Four- New Hypothesis: Disability Comfort**

In this section, I will be presenting a new hypothesis about the evolution of on-screen disability representation and how it mirrors and adds to the current day conversation about disability justice.

By now, we should all know the classic tropes of inspiration porn: the disabled character who’s viewed as nothing more than a vehicle to teach the abled character and the abled audience a shallow life lesson about moving through adversity and overcoming life challenges. But that is outdated, boring, and downright offensive. The creators of these pieces of media wanted to make disabled characters more well rounded and have more agency and this includes giving them flaws. Now the stereotype is the sexually active, freedom-loving, alcohol drinking, foul-mouthed rebel who loves hanging out with friends and cracking adult jokes.

From an angle, this might make sense. After decades of disabled people screaming themselves hoarse, the movie industry finally ‘realized’ how offensive this troupe is and had to do some damage control. In recent years, I’ve seen about half a dozen shows and movies do anything but turn to the camera, hold up a bullhorn, and tell the audience that this is *not* inspiration porn. I watched it and shouldn’t I feel comfortable with these? Shouldn’t I be tearing up in relief over the disabled characters being able to cuss and have sex? Well, the tears didn’t come and the relief sure didn’t come.
With all of this, I felt this profound disconnect with these characters. I want to also point out that this is just my personal, biased opinion. Some disabled people might love these characters and really connect with them.

I also found that there is also this unlikability and selfishness to these characters. The disabled character is often portrayed as annoying and a burden. It’s often stated that this isn’t inspiration porn. In fact, the creators of these pieces of media often pride themselves on the fact that the disabled character is an asshole and not a perfect angel. This would be amazing and awesome if they were relatable and a real character. But they aren’t. At least, not for me. I mean, what can you expect from me? How could I relate to a disabled character written by someone who isn’t disabled? Who made this character clearly as a prop to make a point or some shit? Who is just there for some performative activism and allyship?

Abled people make disabled people palatable for themselves so that they can digest us, rather than genuinely engage with us. They still hate us and want to get rid of us, but they can't get rid of us. So they have to warp us and shove us into tiny, uncomfortable boxes that are so uncomfortable and abusive. Disabled people are also trained by decades of cultural representation to displace their emotions, to center on the emotions of the non-disabled around them, to feel shame about their own anger or pain. So, they make themselves palatable for non disabled people so they can survive and be accepted into society. We have to hide a lot of people to be accepted. We end up traumatized and exhausted. Parts of us get buried and hidden from the world, sometimes for years and sometimes, it can be hidden from even ourselves.

There is a vast difference between the disabled community in their activism and the activism from other marginalized groups. A lot of the ‘activism’ is from our loved ones and caretakers. This is harmful because disabled people are silenced in their own activism. This
creates a cycle of abuse. We have come so far for women and BIPOC people and queer people in terms of conversation. Don’t get me wrong, we are nowhere we need to be with those issues, but we are lacking in the conversation around disability and my theory is that we are not listening to actual disabled people. We are listening to the caretakers and families who don’t know what they’re talking about. Why won’t they let us speak up for ourselves or take it a step further and help us get our message out and voices heard? Why do they keep talking over us?

Oppression and ableism. Disabled people are viewed as burdens to the people who supposed to be our advocates. The disability is viewed as more burdensome on the loved ones than on the disabled person’s loved ones than on the disabled person themselves.

**Conclusion and Next Steps**

Disabled people’s stories are currently not what they should be. They should be disabled people sharing the hardships, joys, stresses, laughs, cries, eyerolls, and everything in between of disabled people’s lives. Instead, they are either a disabled person focused on overcoming their disability to fit into a society that doesn’t want them in the first place or a disabled person becoming a burden for not doing the latter. Newer representations shift away from inspiration porn but still give disabled people an ultimatum. It might seem as simple as, “comply with our abuse or we’ll judge you.” but that just seems too mild. Yes, judgment is a powerful tool, but the impact of the judgment is where the true power lies. Judgment of disabled people not only leads to the upholding of an ableist society, but the common assumption that the oppression of disabled people is actually just “support.”
And that is where I believe most stories of disabled people live: in the area of judgment and giving disabled people that ultimatum. But, as one might guess, the ultimatum rings hollow. Disabled people can follow all the impossible rules and jump through all the hoops and we will still be looked down upon. Our oppressors don’t actually care about the rules. They just need the rules to present an image of a just system so that there is less pushback from the abusive society we actually live in.

While there’s many things that need to be done to get proper disability justice in our society, I believe that disabled stories that tell the true stories of disabled people is one of the steps to get there. It would give the general audience a small view of reality in disabled people’s lives and the hardships we face on a daily basis. I don’t want the generalized audience to sympathize with us and give us pity. disabled people already get too much pity and it’s one of the main things that hold up ableism.

I want them to empathize with us. I want them to watch that scene in Special where Ryan is Skyping his mom and remember a time when they had something weighing them down to the center of the earth and was unable to even tell their closest loved ones. I want them to watch scenes with Ryan and Olivia and remember that horrible boss they had that made them lose sleep at night. I want them to watch the scenes of Ryan and Kim and remember their favorite memories with their best friends. If they can connect to us and see us as real people with complex problems, hopefully they can see why we deserve the same basic human rights as everyone else without having to work ourselves to the point of exhaustion.

This is only my first step on my journey of disability representation analysis. Disability comfort is currently just a hypothesis. I need to do further research and analysis on more primary texts to see if it holds up upon further research. I am planning to write a book that is a hybrid
between a personal memoir, literary analysis, and theory. In this book, I plan on doing a deeper dive into the intersections of representational analysis and lived experience and activism. I will continue my conversation about mental health and emotional gaslighting. I also want to look at Dr. Lenore E. A. Walker’s cycle theory of violence and see if I can use it to explain systematic ableism from a different angle and possibly connect it to the toll oppression takes on the mental health of not all disabled people, but also other marginalized people.

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