

Compulsory Perfection

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Writing 20 (Fall 2006): Becoming Disabled
Professor Matthew Brim



When you think about Duke, I doubt that “disabled” is a word that comes to mind. Before I took my Writing 20 class last fall — entitled *Becoming Disabled*, taught by Dr. Matthew Brim — I know I

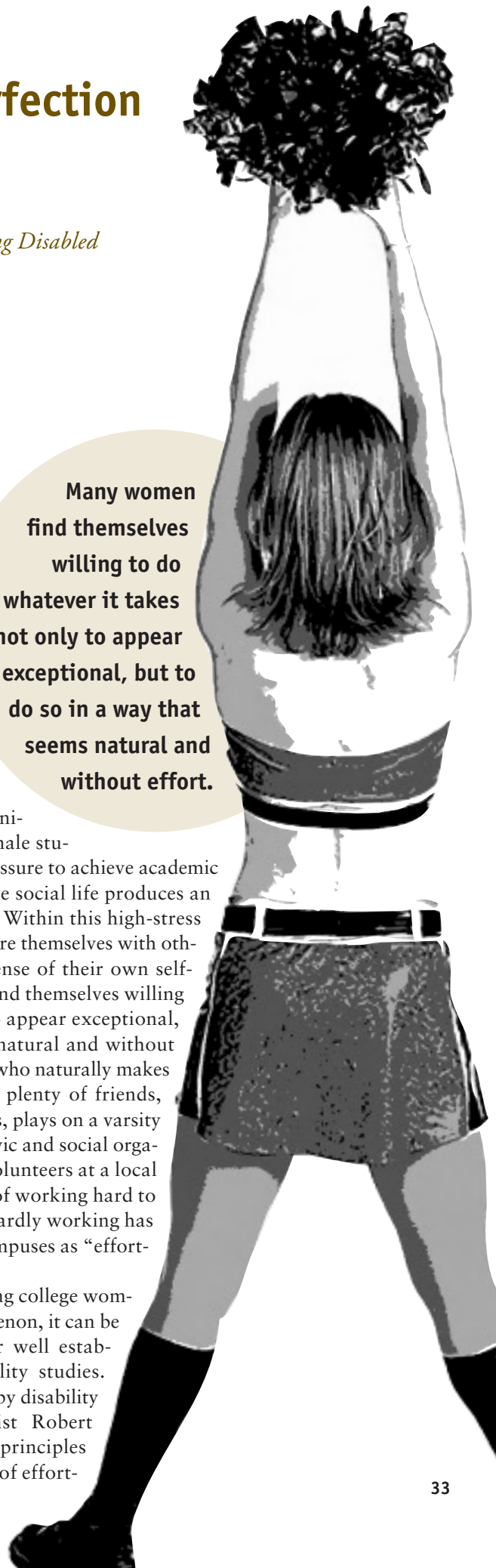
never would have associated Duke with disability. But this particular essay, which started out as my first big assignment for that class, presented me with a challenge I had never before faced in writing. At the time, I had plenty of experience writing about already published ideas, and I could offer my own thoughts and opinions about a topic without hesitation. This specific assignment, however, was a totally new style of writing for me, which asked me to connect existing disability theory to my everyday life at Duke; essentially requiring that I sift through the dense language of largely-scientific theory in an attempt to find the inspiration for a compelling paper that would promote my own agenda. In creating such a paper, I would need to utilize the published work of others as support for my own unique argument, interspersing an appropriate balance of quotations, summary, and my personal thoughts and ideas throughout. ▶

Especially at prestigious universities such as Duke, and for female students in particular, the constant pressure to achieve academic success while maintaining an active social life produces an intensely competitive atmosphere.

In a nation where “[being] normal probably outranks all other social aspirations,” college students across America will attest to the fact that the years spent between graduating high school and entering the job market are filled with the incessant longing to be accepted, not only by professors and potential employers, but more importantly by their peers.¹ Especially at prestigious universities such as Duke, and for female students in particular, the constant pressure to achieve academic success while maintaining an active social life produces an intensely competitive atmosphere. Within this high-stress environment, students often compare themselves with others in an attempt to establish a sense of their own self-worth. As a result, many women find themselves willing to do whatever it takes not only to appear exceptional, but to do so in a way that seems natural and without effort. They strive to be “that girl” who naturally makes straight A’s in the classroom, has plenty of friends, stays up on the latest fashion trends, plays on a varsity sports team, is active in multiple civic and social organizations, and in her spare time, volunteers at a local charity. This paradoxical lifestyle of working hard to create the appearance that one is hardly working has come to be identified on college campuses as “effortless perfection.”

While effortless perfection among college women may be a relatively new phenomenon, it can be better understood within another well established theoretical context: disability studies. One theory in particular, proposed by disability rights activist and queer theorist Robert McRuer, is based on a few central principles that coincide closely with the idea of effort-

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As such, this paper certainly wasn't as easy to get into as other kinds of papers I had written in the past, and it took me a lot longer than I had expected to simply find a theme that I really wanted to explore. But the more I looked, the more flexible my brain became in terms of the ability to recognize the surprising amount of relevance that disability theory had to other, more prominent areas of my everyday life. By the time I finally found the external sources that I ended up using in my essay, I had discovered all kinds of crazy parallels and developed loads of intriguing questions that I was actually excited to look into.

This time last year, I never would have thought that it possible, but through this writing process, I found a way to connect published pieces of disability theory we'd discussed in class with some of my thoughts and ideas about the culture of undergraduate women at Duke.

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less perfection. This theory, which McRuer calls "compulsory able-bodiedness," states that able-bodied identity is based on an ultimately unattainable norm that inherently "[casts] some identities as alternatives," and "ironically buttresses the ideological notion that dominant identities are not really alternatives but rather the natural order of things."² In other words, McRuer's theory suggests that people attempt to define their own status of personal able-bodiedness by comparing themselves to a seemingly flawless identity that, although largely unrealistic, somehow becomes the generally-accepted norm. Furthermore, because able-bodiedness (as opposed to disability) is seen as the "dominant"—or most prevalent—identity in everyday society, it therefore becomes "compulsory," or what is seen as natural or right, making any other identity seem different or wrong.

In this sense, the theory of compulsory able-bodiedness compares the able-bodied identity to the disabled identity in much the same way that effortless perfection compares the perfect identity to the non-perfect identity. So while McRuer may have intended to apply his theory strictly within the context of disability studies, many of his most fundamental concepts are also applicable to college females. These young women—like McRuer's able-bodied individuals—are victimized by the idea that their normalcy is dependent upon the existence of abnormality or, as McRuer might say, their apparent perfection "depends [...] on the ways in which [non-perfect bodies] are made visible (or we might say, comprehensible)."³ As such, extending McRuer's theory into the lives of undergraduate university women inevitably raises the need to explore just how deeply these two ideologies are intertwined in an everyday setting. Moreover, how is the theory of compulsory able-bodiedness exemplified by the way women at Duke strive to achieve effortless perfection?

Before delving into the extent to which these two theories overlap, however, it is important to recognize the inherent bias of the aforementioned question. According to McRuer, the dominant culture, or "[t]he culture asking such questions" as those at the

heart of this essay, possesses an underlying partiality which "assumes in advance that we all agree: able-bodied identities, able-bodied perspectives are preferable and what we all, collectively, are aiming for."⁴ Beyond the realm of disability studies, a similar partiality exists within the "culture" of women at Duke, in that those individuals who strive for effortless perfection assume that all female Duke students aim to embody the same identity of that beautiful, smart, trendy, athletic, thoughtful, successful, "effortlessly perfect girl." Many people outside the Duke community also share in this assumption, in that the existence of effortless perfection at Duke and other equally competitive universities may appear to the unknowing eye to be representative of all undergraduate women at such institutions. However, while this particular brand of Duke female may struggle to seem carefree as she tries to do and have it all, there are other Duke women who refuse to buy into what they consider to be the unnecessary pressure that comes along with trying to fit the mold of effortless perfection. But under the system of effortless perfection, these individuals are ultimately grouped together—despite their unique backgrounds, personalities, cultures, and life experiences—into a single group, collectively deemed the non-perfect "other," an identity that parallels McRuer's similarly over-inclusive identity of the disabled "other."

This "non-perfect" identity among Duke women appears to fit comfortably within disability rights activist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's idea of the "other" as an essential element to re-affirming one's own normalcy. Although a "non-perfect" Duke female does not by any means constitute a "freak" or an "invalid," she might still make Garland-Thomson's list of "the freak, the cripple, the invalid, [and] the disabled," as "representational products" that help to "naturalize a norm comprised of accepted bodily traits and behaviors registering social power and status."⁵ Even while a non-perfect identity does not suggest disability at all and is likely to share no tangible commonalities with any other identity on Garland-Thomson's list, the

non-perfect Duke female nonetheless serves as an alternative to the norm (as accepted under the system of effortless perfection), in much the same way that a “cripple” would serve as an alternative to an able-bodied person within the theory of compulsory able-bodiedness. Therefore, the monstrous stigma that attaches itself to the label of the non-perfect “other” creates a basis upon which the perfectionist-type can easily identify her own relative sense of greatness in recognizing that she is certainly not like them. As such, for women at Duke, the non-perfect “other”—like the disabled other in both McRuer and Garland-Thomson’s disability theories—ultimately provides both the able-bodied and the perfectionist-type individual with what McRuer identifies as “an affirmative answer to [their own] unspoken question, Yes, but in the end wouldn’t you rather be more like me?”⁶

Yet in dealing with a condition as capricious as “perfection” or able-bodiedness—where a single change in fashion or an unexpected accident could permanently alter one’s perfect or able-bodied status—the satisfaction of this affirmative answer is inevitably polluted by the pervasive possibility for change. Even those individuals who claim to have mastered effortless perfection or ultimate able-bodiedness can only distance themselves so far from the lingering fear of one day transforming into the “other.” Garland-Thomson acknowledges this enduring dread in pointing out the “troubling” way “disability suggests that the cultural other lies dormant within the cultural self, threatening abrupt or gradual transformation from ‘man’ to ‘invalid.’”⁷ For the perfectionist-type women at Duke, ever-changing trends in clothing or hair styles—along with the pressure to impress others while maintaining good grades and playing sports—foments the possibility of a similarly frightening conversion from cool to uncool. As such, the non-perfect “other,” cast by Garland-Thomson as “one of societies’ ultimate ‘not-me’ figures,” is “at once familiarly human but definitively other,” and thus “assures the rest of the citizenry of who they are not while arousing their suspicions about who they could become.”⁸

However, while this particular brand of Duke female may struggle to seem carefree as she tries to do and have it all, there are other Duke women who refuse to buy into what they consider to be the unnecessary pressure that comes along with trying to fit the mold of effortless perfection.

This idea creates a fine line between perfection and the non-perfect “other,” suggesting that because such a distinction may be based on a detail as trivial as what is presently in fashion, every perfect identity is susceptible to losing this status at any given time. Moreover, it is the same “other” that allows women at Duke to establish a relative sense of effortless perfection that also prevents them from feeling comfortable in such a lifestyle.⁹

This complex irony highlights the twofold paradoxical foundation upon which both the ideologies of able-bodiedness and effortless perfection are built. For McRuer, one such paradox exists in the way “compulsory able-bodiedness functions by covering over with the appearance of a choice a system in which there actually is no choice.”¹⁰ Whether comparing the healthy young male to the paraplegic or the beauty queen to the computer geek, the ability to appreciate the idealized norm as one of many alternatives has been lost in the expectation to view any kind of deviance as abnormal and thus unacceptable. While the wide variety of courses, clubs, and other organizations offered at Duke provide female students with the opportunity to cultivate and embrace any number of unique talents and interests, these “choices” are overshadowed by incessant social pressure and the overwhelming desire to fit in. As a result, the decision to pursue one’s own idea of success becomes more of an illusion than a reality, as she is ultimately directed toward the narrowly defined path of effortless perfection. In following this increasingly popular path, however, women often come to realize—after four or more years of wanting to be liked so desperately that it meant ignoring any true passions that were seen as abnormal—that “perfection,” like able-bodiedness is (as McRuer describes it) “incomprehensible in that [it] is an identity that is simultaneously the ground on which all identities supposedly rest and an impressive achievement that is always deferred and thus never really guaranteed.”¹¹ In other words, a second paradox exists in that the desire to obtain the “absolute” effortless perfection or

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The desire to obtain the “absolute” effortless perfection or the “ultimate” able-body leaves both female Duke students and able-bodied hopefuls working toward an identity that, while unquestionably real in their minds, inevitably proves out of reach.



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The way I see it, however, the most perplexing paradox of all lies in the simple reality that effortless perfection is popular among women at Duke. In much the same way that the life experience of authorities such as McRuer and Garland-Thomson led them to explore the complexities of compulsory able-bodiedness, my own experience as a female Duke student leaves me wondering about effortless perfection among my female classmates. One would imagine that such a privileged institution with access to phenomenal resources and extraordinary learning opportunities should provide its students with all the necessary tools to fight against oppressive social stereotypes. As such, even despite ubiquitous social stresses and pressures, it is inexplicably ironic that women at Duke are especially susceptible to the disabling effects of effortless perfection. In my mind, the real issue is not so much that women in general feel more compelled than men to appear naturally flawless, nor that the college years, more than any other time in life, inspire a longing to be accepted by others. To me, the issue of greatest concern is why

these particular women—who are bright, talented and successful enough to gain entry to Duke—insist on clinging to the restrictive guidelines of a single popularized lifestyle rather than recognizing the absurdity of such a limiting system, and instead fighting to pursue their own individuality. ■

Notes

¹ Robert McRuer, “Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence,” *The Disability Studies Reader* 2nd ed., ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006) 302.

² McRuer 301.

³ McRuer 301.

⁴ McRuer 304.

⁵ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 44.

⁶ McRuer 304.

⁷ Garland-Thomson 43.

⁸ Garland-Thomson 41.

⁹ Garland-Thomson 41.

¹⁰ McRuer 303.

¹¹ McRuer 304.