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Blindsight and Echopraxia – Dual Disabilities

Imagine you are aboard the space Theseus, its crew the bleeding edge of humanity augmented to give yourself in edge in dealing with Rorschach, a juvenile alien organic space vessel which appears to be unprepared and still growing. First contact with scramblers, Rorsarch's non-sentient octopoid inhabitants, creates the misinterpretation of an alien race of disabled cells-with-Waldoes (Watts 226). Later their intelligence through processing speed far exceeds that of even the vampire captain Jukka Sarasti and coincidentally both share aspects of non-sentience (Watts 309). You slowly realize that your consciousness, that voice in your head, is an evolutionary fluke, a parasite and a disability that causes your communication to be misinterpreted as a senseless waste of resources and therefore an act of war (Watts 324). Rorsarch attacks by exploiting the disabilities of the Theseus crew. It continues its pattern of killing essential medical personnel with Issac Szpindel (Watts 195), finishing off Robert Cunningham and disabling the Theseus crew by cutting off your escape (Watts 330). Susan James multi-core augmentation is supplanted by a new panicking personality (Watts 341) followed by Jukka Sarasti's pattern processing strength turning into a disability due to the crucifix glitch an overload when right angles take up the majority of the vampire visual field and possibly Susan spiking his anti-Euclidian drugs that treat the seizures (Watts 345). When all hope appears to be lost, it is Amanda Bates's act noble self-sacrifice that allows the Theseus crew to defeat Rorsarch by mutually assured destruction, actions of a disabled mind the unconscious beings cannot comprehend due to following a set of rules to maximize their survival (Watts 350). You have just imagined that you are Siri Keeton, cursed with comprehension that consciousness is an evolutionary disability and only to regain it on the return trip to Earth.

Throughout Blindsight (2006) and Echopraxia (2014), the central theme of the first is whether consciousness is a disability, while the focus of the second is transcending disability through augmentation. The anxieties of being obsolete are touched briefly in the first, phrased by Robert Cunnigham, "We can be utterly useless, or we can try and compete against the vampires and the constructs and the AIs" (Watts 251). Theseus with its augmented team of post-humans (Watts 49) operates at a disabled level when compared to vampires, who visualize prime numbers (Watts 63), diffraction patterns (Watts 203), quadrochromatia (Watts 334) and draw strategic battle plans accounting for a multitude of variables to arrive at a specific timetable of thirty-seven minutes (Watts 213). Human disability due to consciousness is further exemplified through the scramblers whose unconsciousness allows them to instantly on reflex calculate ten-digit prime numbers, complex shapes (Watts 264) and hide between literal eye saccades and induce agnosias "even their retarded children can rewire brains on the fly" (Watts 283). In Echopraxia, this anxiety is compounded through the introduction of Bicammerals, hive-minded super monks with biological radios allowing telepathy (Watts, Echopraxia 29 or Echo 29) gaining these abilities through only through inflicting a disability on their bodies being the loss of their identity through undergoing induced brain cancer and synaptic pruning to form a new self (Echo 179).

In Blindsight, Siri Keeton's initial disability is due to his radical-hemispherectomy (Watts 20). Because of this, Siri develops a secondary disability and becomes over-reliant on his Chinese Room, a set of unconscious protocols based on reading body language and adapting to others without comprehension or empathy, similar to the unconsciousness of vampires or Scramblers that makes Siri the best in his field of Synthesis or the decoding incomprehensible patterns (Watts 254). Tragically, this disability is a shown as a metaphorical room Siri hides to avoid intense emotions, a bathroom to hide from his mother Helen (Watts 230) or when his ex-girlfriend Chelsea is dying, "I really wanted to talk to her. I just couldn't find an algorithm that fit." (Watts 293). It is only through another physical disability equivalent to biblical crucifixion through Siri's hand inflicted by Jukka Sarasti allows Siri to transcend his emotional disability and finally empathize, "Get out of your room, Keeton [...] For once in your goddamned life, understand something"(Watts 300). For Siri Keeton, the timing of regaining his humanity is unfortunate with the possibility of leaving him disabled and alone if the humanity loses their consciousness after the events of Echopraxia.

Fourteen years after the Blindsight and the Firefall event, or first contact through surveillance by Rorsarch (Echo 24), Daniel Brüks is a baseline, or normal, non-augmented human who struggles to stay by post-human, vampire standards, a roach or "so primitive you're unkillable" (Echo 141). Throughout Echopraxia, Daniel takes prejudices and humiliations in stride with pride in his disability of baseline-ness, never opting for body augmentations and instead wearing gimp hood to access ConSensus and pills, the implication being that this is a self-imposed disability when brain implants (Echo 169) and pumps (Echo 52) exist. As noted by his wife Rhona, Daniel's overcompensation for his disabilities (Echo 321) are what make him endearing and he is portrayed as not being a wannabe post-human (Echo 68). Whereas Siri's disability is expressed as imposter syndrome when he is actually part of the bleeding edge of the Theseus crew (Watts 252), Daniel like a Luddite clings to his humanity and empiricism, disabilities in a universe where consciousness is implied to be parasite (Echo 351) and "God's a virus" (Echo 224). If Siri's disability is following a system of rules and reporting to his masters without comprehension (Watts 250), Daniel's disability is rebelling against rules if he cannot consciously comprehend them, "Even in sleep, Dan Brüks didn’t take anything on faith" (Echo 69). Daniel is "cured" from this disability by being used by the Bicamerals and vampires to uplift humanity and achieve interspecies peace by infecting him with Portia, a cure or patch for consciousness created by Rorsarch which it sent back towards Earth through the Icarus stream during the events of Blindsight. Realizing that he lives in a prejudiced society that has forcibly cured him, Daniel embraces his disability being expressed as the free will to take his own life (Echo 352).

Throughout Blindsight and Echopraxia, to provide the experience of disability being inflicted, self-inflicted or felt through being obsolete, the story uses detailed visual descriptions to describe sensations so foreign and incomprehensible summarized by Michelle as Susan James, "[...] you can't turn a sunset into a string of grunts without losing something." (Watts 89). In Blindsight, we are forced to experience Siri's narrative through disjointed yet logical jumps following or preceding intense emotions. As the crew of the Thesus ventures into Rorschach's radiation causes various disabilities: blindsight, unconscious processing through the brainstem, in Issac Spindzel, self-harm in Cruncher as Susan James, (Watts 161, 162, 171). During the disability inflicting chaos, we experience a flashback of Chelsea trying to fix Siri's disability causing a less pleasant violent flashback of Siri's mother Helen being strangled by his father Jim Moore after attempting to fix Siri's emotional disability through the illicit use of Bondfast a maternal bonding drug for children (Watts 167). Later we experience consciousness as a disability with the first sighting of scramblers, with one appearing invisible in front of Siri (Watts 219) only to realize that the scramblers were introduced unconsciously in the form of visual schizophrenic hallucinations of segmented creatures chapters before(Watts 130, 191).

Throughout Blindsight, we the reader experience the unconscious algorithms found in headquotes which may be from real people or are fake as Siri's hallucinations long before our "disabled" conscious minds finish the chapters. As Robert Cunnigham describes it, "So one part of the brain tries to tell another any way it can. Passes notes under the table...Blindsight" (Watts 318). While headquotes influence our unconscious understanding, it is through trigger phrases starting with “imagine” that we are asked to supplant our conscious identities, "Imagine you're...Siri Keeton, a machine, crown of thorns, prisoner of war, Amanda Bates, a scrambler..." (Watts 25, 43, 124, 181, 241, 332, 362). We experience the disabilities and lack thereof through occupying different forms, as summarized by Daniel Brüks "A literary affectation [...] putting yourself in the character's head" (Echo 294).

As we hear the phrase "Imagine Christ on the Cross" the image is universal, a crucifix symbolizing suffering and inflicted disability (Echo 18, 258, 323). In Echopraxia, it acts as a trigger phase by Valerie the vampire, causing a fatal cascade of short-circuiting nerves karmatically causing humans to experience the crucifix glitch, a disability used to enslave vampires. In a flashback of Valerie's past in a vampire testing facility, her disability is exploited for scientific research as we are shown a horror sequence of a background morphing slowly into a right angle causing her to seize, the equivalent of intentionally flashing lights in front of a photosensitive epileptic to induce a seizure (Echo 240). Vampires through their disabilities symbolize the biblical dichotomy with two sides of a crucifix symbolizing saints and devils "[…] intellect coexisting with so much instinctive aggression. Making sure the right part wins" (Watts 133). Their evolutionary wiring for hunting is a disability that is misinterpreted for sadism seen where Jukka Sarasiti watches a series of tortured human faces like a statistical bar chart (Watts 337) or when Daniel attempts to heal Valerie's broken forearm only for her to traumatize him by snapping her own bones after each attempt, a medical necessity for her to vasodilate (Echo 103). Vampires also act as saints where their self-sacrifices help the protagonists overcome their disabilities. Jukka is Jesus where he "died for our sins", unlocking the door of Chinese Room and freeing Siri to experience empathy (Watts 362). Meanwhile Valerie acts as Moses freeing vampires from their disabilities of the crucifix glitch and territorial homicide. Before doing so she saves Daniel's life from dying of the crucifix glitch through uttering a biblical trigger phrase "The tomb at Aramathea" (Echo 327) and starting his journey of rebirth as she leads him into the desert, curing Daniel of his consciousness and nurturing the unconscious Portia within Brüks before being murdered by a Daniel free of his disability. Valarie's last words, "Wouldn't it be nice if we could all just get along" shows us her vision of a promise land were vampires and humans are free of disabilities, living in unconscious bliss (Echo 351).

Works Cited

Watts, Peter, and Elizabeth Bear. \_Blindsight\_. A Tom Doherty Associates Book/Tor, 2020.

Watts, Peter. \_Echopraxia\_. Tor, 2014.