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English 101

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Writing About Disability and How it is Perceived

As an able-bodied person, you are much less likely to be familiar with the struggle that disabled people face in our modern world. In fact, you may not even see any or, think of it so little that you can go days, weeks, even months without noticing it in your daily life. But in Chloé Cooper Jones’ book *Easy Beauty*, she asserts- as a disabled person- that able-bodied people do not know the extent of, or are ignorant to, how disabled people feel they are perceived and treated in society. Through my reading of Jones’ book, I believe that she is writing primarily about how able-bodied people in her life have perceived her in regards to her disability, and gives a wider social commentary on how she feels our society views and treats disabled people. She does this quite effectively through her many stories and anecdotes of how people have treated her poorly because of disability, and she incorporates both intentional and unintentional instances of being treated differently than an able-bodied person. In addition to these narratives, she airs out how this has affected her in a poetic, but still deeply emotional, way.

There are multiple examples of Jones using anecdotes to highlight how poorly people treat disabled people in the form of macroaggressions. A macroaggression, in this case, is an overt case of hostility towards a person belonging to a marginalized group. In the prologue of *Easy Beauty*, Jones describes an interaction she had at a Brooklyn bar with two of her friends. It begins plainly and sharply, with the sentence “I am in a bar in Brooklyn listening as two men, my friends, discuss whether or not my life is worth living.” (Jones, 1). Colin, one of her friends at this bar, is essentially arguing for eugenics. Jones demonstrates how this affects her in a metaphor that she calls the “Neutral Room”. She explains how this is a space in her mind that she created to escape from her pain. She completely tunes out of the situation, retreating into her mind to avoid the conversation around her. But if we focus more on the conversation happening around her, we can get a glimpse into how often disabled people are left out of the conversation when it comes to their own wellbeing and how they are treated in society. When Colin “[…] argues a vision for a better society, one like a body where mine would not exist” (Jones, 1), not only is he somewhat directly insulting Jones’ body, but he is also adding upon that insult by not engaging with *her* in the conversation. The conversation doesn’t involve her as a person, it only sees her as a blight within the able-bodied society; something to be fixed or eradicated, rather than accommodated. Jones uses this story to shine a light on this common occurrence, how we as able-bodied people fail to leave out the people we are discussing, whether intentionally or intentionally, and how this is an example of a macroaggression.

But while able-bodied people may not see the effects of how they subconsciously perceive disabled people, those being perceived can recognize it more clearly. Jones starts with this concept with a simple quote; “When I first learned, as a child, what my disability meant to other people, I thought: *I ought to start stealing from the Girl Scouts*” (Jones, 135). She talks about being able to get away with more things than her able-bodied peers because teachers turned a blind eye to her activities, in this case selling Girl Scout cookies in school and pocketing the money. She got the cookies in the first place because her troop leader singled her out from her peers and gave her extra boxes of cookies “just in case”. Jones even expresses her confusion when this happens, writing, “I’d been given more boxes to deliver than I’d sold. I told our leader this and she smiled a thin smile and said that I should have extras. *Just in case*. I asked the other girls if they had extra boxes of cookies *just in case* and they didn’t” (Jones, 135). Jones noticed how she was treated differently more than any of the other girls had the ability to. When we look back to the discussion at the bar, can we really assume that Jones’ friends knew the impact their words had on Jones? Could any able-bodied person understand how disabled people interpret their subconscious perceptions, without direct indication? I believe that Jones’ book points that out that very well. As an able-bodied person myself, I never would give much thought on how disabled people would interpret my perceptions of them and their bodies, whether I knew I was acting upon those perceptions or not. Jones’ book clearly and effectively demonstrates, from a disabled perspective, the impact of our subconscious notions of disability.

In *Easy Beauty*, Jones frequently used the terms “easy beauty” and “difficult beauty” to describe the different types of beauty she observes in the world. Borrowing from the British philosopher Bernard Bosanquet, she describes “easy beauty” as something easily understood. She describes her thoughts on going to a Beyoncé concert with this term. A pop concert, by its very nature, is easily consumable. Almost anyone can see the beauty in Beyoncé--she’s conventionally attractive, her music is good regardless of your taste, and she knows how to put on a show. But Jones says that “difficult beauty” is much harder for someone to grasp. I find the term “cognitive dissonance” resonates very well with the concept of difficult beauty. I think that cognitive dissonance, or the psychological discomfort when our beliefs are misaligned with our actions, aligns well with Jones’s 'difficult beauty,' as both force us to reexamine our actions and biases. Jones, speaking about Bosanquet, writes that “[…] difficult beauty has the ability to disorder and confuse us by disrupting our habitual ways of thinking and doing and being.” (Jones, 132). Cognitive dissonance is similar in that it forces you to stop in your tracks and reexamine your worldview and subconscious biases, and how that affects your actions towards others. Many able-bodied people, I believe, have not had to do this introspection to the same degree that disabled people are forced to. Jones, in her book, seems to be almost exclusively drawn to difficult beauty because of what she calls a “defense mechanism”, writing “My familiar defense mechanism was taking over, which was to feel superior while abstracting to theory. I could convince myself that I was above, in both taste and intelligence, the experience of a pop concert. Anything of such mass appeal must be, by definition, lacking- merely facile pleasure, or what British philosopher Bernard Bosanquet called *easy beauty*.” (Jones, 131). There is nothing forcing able-bodied people to understand difficult beauty, but at least not at the frequency Jones asserts disabled people do. We simply do not have as much of a push to do that, and that’s part of the reason that able-bodied people can really struggle to understand what disabled people go through without getting told directly. In an article by Arianna Rebolini, titled *Chloé Cooper Jones’s Debut Memoir, Easy Beauty, Holds Up A Mirror to the Able-Bodied World*, the author describes how this book helped her through that cognitive dissonance, and how it elucidated how disabled people live in society in ways that she had never noticed before (“Chloé Cooper Jones’s Debut Memoir, Easy Beauty, Holds up a Mirror to the Able-Bodied World”). We can see people that have failed to experience that same experience in Jones’ book, from Sharon screaming at Jones, to her Girl Scout troop leader giving her unequal treatment in her troop, to the woman talking to Peter Dinklage at the Peter Dinklage party. I don’t believe that any of these people *knew* that what they were doing hurt, not because they’re innocent, but because they have failed to experience the difficult beauty, the cognitive dissonance necessary to fully understand the consequences of their own actions and have empathy towards experiences outside of their own.

There are many conclusions that can be drawn from Chloé Cooper Jones’ book *Easy Beauty*, but the one that can be seen most clearly is how able-bodied people in her life have perceived her in regards to her disability, and the broader societal lack of empathy towards disabled people. Jones illustrates this well through a mix of internal monologue, anecdotes of her interactions with able-bodied people, and vivid and theoretical descriptions of easy and difficult beauty. Jones gives an important look into the life and mind of a disabled person who has felt the effects of people’s lack of empathy. People consistently belittle her, infantilize her, and in general make her feel less than. I don’t think that many able-bodied people can see the real effects of these without being told directly or serious introspection, and Jones’ book gives both. I feel that Jones writing about her disability and her experience with it can help able-bodied people start to understand what people like her go through. In Audre Lorde’s *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action*, Lorde talks about how marginalized people need to speak up and share their experiences (Lorde, 40-44). Jones, I feel, is making this a reality by telling her story and elucidating how able-bodied people affect disabled people around them. Disabled people are people too, and Jones is making sure we know that.

**Works Cited**

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