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## I.

My subject will be recognized as passing although I plan to give it a few unexpected twists and turns. For I have been keeping secrets and telling lies. In December 1999, I had an altercation at the San Francisco airport with a gatekeeper for Northwest Airlines, who demanded that I use a wheelchair if I wanted to claim the early-boarding option. He did not want to accept that I was disabled unless my status was validated by a highly visible prop like a wheelchair. In the years since I have begun to feel the effects of postpolio, my practice has been to board airplanes immediately after the first-class passengers so that I do not have to navigate crowded aisles on wobbly legs. I answered the gatekeeper that I would be in a wheelchair soon enough, but that it was my decision, not his, when I began to use one. He eventually let me board and then chased after me on an afterthought to apologize. The incident was trivial in many ways, but I have now adopted the habit of exaggerating my limp whenever I board planes. My exaggeration is not always sufficient to render my disability visible—gatekeepers still question me on occasion—but I continue to use the strategy, despite the fact that it fills me with a sense of anxiety and bad faith, emotions that resonate with previous experiences in which doctors and nurses have accused me of false complaints, oversensitivity, and malingering.

In January 2001, I slipped on a small patch of ice and broke my knee. It was my right knee, the leg affected by polio when I was two years old. For the next few months, I used wooden crutches, a prosthetic device, unlike forearm crutches, that usually signifies temporary injury rather than long-term disability. Throughout my life I have spent long periods on crutches, and my return to them summoned a series of powerful emotions. For one thing, it was the first time I found myself on crutches since I had come out as disabled.[1] The crutches projected to the public world what I felt to be a profound symbol of my inner life as well as my present status as a person with a disability. They also

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gave me great hope for the future because I had begun to worry that I would not be able to get around as I grew older, and I soon realized to my relief that I could do very well on my crutches. I had been tutored in their use from such an early age that I felt as if a part of my body once lost to me had somehow been restored as soon as I slipped them under my arms. Nevertheless, I found myself giving an entirely new answer to the question posed to me by people on the street. "What's wrong with you?" they always ask. My new answer: "I slipped on the ice and broke my knee."

To pass or not to pass—that is often the question. But do these two narratives about disability illustrate the conventional understanding of keeping secrets about identity? Erving Goffman defines passing as a strategy for managing the stigma of "spoiled identities"—those discredited by law, opinion, or social convention.[2] When in the minority and powerless, Jews pass as Christians, blacks pass as whites, and gay, lesbian, and transgendered people pass as heterosexuals. Similarly, people with disabilities find ingenious ways to conceal their impairments and pass as able-bodied. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, however, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests that secrets concerning identity are a more complicated affair than Goffman's definition allows, arguing persuasively that the historical specificity of the closet has marked indelibly the meaning of "secrecy" in twentieth-century Western culture.[3] Closeting involves things not merely concealed but difficult to disclose—the inability to disclose is, in fact, one of the constitutive markers of oppression. The epistemology of the closet complicates the usual understanding of passing because it disrupts the structural binary that represents passing as an action taking place between knowing and unknowing subjects. The closet often holds secrets that either cannot be told or are being kept by those who do not want to know the truth about the closeted person. Some people keep secrets; other people are secrets. Some people hide in the closet, but others are locked in the closet. There is a long history, of course, of locking away people with disabilities in attics, basements, and backrooms—not to mention the many institutions created to keep secret the existence of disabled family members. Secrets about disability may appear mundane compared to those associated with the gay experience because the closet cannot be mapped according to the simple binary opposition between private and public existence. But if disability studies has anything to learn from queer theory, it is that secrecy rarely depends on simple binaries.

Sedgwick argues that an open secret compulsorily kept characterizes the epistemology of the closet, and she provides as an example the bewildering case of an eighth-grade schoolteacher named Acanfora who disclosed his homosexuality and was removed from the classroom. When he sued the local board of education, a federal court found that he could not be denied employment because of his homosexuality but supported the decision of the board to remove him because he had not disclosed his homosexuality on his job application (69–70). By a tortured logic, too much information suddenly became too little, and Acanfora was punished. It is increasingly apparent that a similar logic also plagues disability law, which is one reason why queer theory holds important lessons for disability studies. In a recent high-profile case, the United States Supreme Court found that two women pilots denied employment by United Airlines because they were nearsighted could not seek protection under the Americans with Disabilities Act due to the fact that they were not disabled. The social representation of difference as negative or inferior, not the existence of physical and mental differences, defines disability discrimination. Yet the two pilots were not allowed to seek protection under the law, even though United Airlines denied them employment by deeming their bodies inferior and the Court ruled that this representation was false. For the purposes of the law, the women were given two bodies, one by the Court and another by United Airlines, as if doing so were the only way to sustain the impossible double standard being applied to them.[4]

The incoherent legal cases of Acanfora and the women pilots expose the closet at work, what Sedgwick calls "vectors of a disclosure at once compulsory and forbidden" (70). The closet is an oppressive structure because it controls the flow of information beyond individual desire for disclosure or secrecy and because it is able to convert either disclosure or secrecy into the opposite. Putting oneself in the closet is not as easy as closing the door. Coming out of the closet is not as simple as opening it. Parents and relatives do not want to hear about queer identity. "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" is, of course, the motto of the military.[5] Wheelchair users understand what it is to be overlooked by a sea of passersby, and people with birthmarks or facial deformities are often strategically ignored as well. The smallest facial deformity invites the furtive glance, stolen when you are not looking, looking away when you look back. Invite the stare you otherwise fear, and you may find yourself invisible, beyond staring.[6] Passing is possible not only because people have sufficient genius to disguise their identity but also because society has a general tendency to repress the embodiment of difference. This is what queer theory teaches people with disabilities about the epistemology of the closet.

Nevertheless, the closet may not be entirely adequate to portray the experience of people with disabilities. Sedgwick makes the case that the image of the closet, as resonant as it may be for many modern oppressions, is "indicative for homophobia in a way it cannot be for other oppressions," including "physical handicap" (75). Oppressions based on race, gender, age, size, and disability, according to Sedgwick, focus on visible stigmas, while homophobia does not.[7] The concept of visible stigma provides no good reason, I will argue, to dissociate disability from the epistemology of the closet because it does not take into account invisible disabilities such as deafness, chronic fatigue, autism, and dyslexia. More important, it makes no sense to link oppression to physical and mental characteristics of the body, visible or not, because the cause of oppression usually exists in the social or built environment and not in the body. Every inaccessible building is a closet representing the oppression of people with disabilities by able-bodied society. I do think, however, that Sedgwick is correct to hesitate about the wholesale equivalence of passing with regard to disability and homosexuality—not because people with disabilities are not closeted but because disability passing presents forms of legibility and illegibility that alter the logic of the closet.

Although people with disabilities may try to pass in the classic sense of the term by concealing their disability from discovery, they also engage in a little discussed practice, structurally akin to passing but not identical to it, in which they disguise one kind of disability with another or display their disability by exaggerating it. This practice clouds the legibility of passing, and it is sufficiently different from traditional passing both to merit a closer look and to invite its own terminology. My strategy here is to reach out to queer theory and its prehistory for models to think about both passing and the politicization of identity in the disability community. Nevertheless, my argument is meant to be "second wave" insofar as it is concerned less with passing in the classic sense than with unconventional uses of disability identity. My method is to gather as many narratives about alternative disability passing as possible to make up for the dearth of theory, since narrative is, according to Barbara Christian, where theory takes place.[8] I refer to these altered forms of disability passing as the "masquerade."

## II.

The concept of the masquerade, long a staple of feminist and queer theory, offers an opportunity to rethink passing from the point of view of disability studies because it claims disability as a version of itself rather than simply concealing it from view. Joan Riviere's 1929 essay, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," presents the case study of a gifted academic who flirts compulsively with the men in her audience after each successful intellectual performance, wearing the mask of womanliness to defend herself against both her own feelings of gender anxiety and reprisals by men.[9] "I shall attempt to show," Riviere explains, "that women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and retribution feared from men" (91). While this mask serves as a form of passing, it differs from the classic forms defined by queer theory and critical race studies. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people who closet themselves or people of color who pretend to be white usually wish to avoid social stigmatization and to gain the safety and advantages offered by dominant social roles. Only rarely do dominant groups try to pass as lesser ones. Adrian Piper, for example, notes that being black is a social condition that "no white person would voluntarily assume."[10] Passing preserves social hierarchies because it assumes that individuals want to rise above their present social station and that the station to which they aspire belongs to a dominant social group. It stamps the dominant social position as simultaneously normative and desirable.

Riviere's "woman," however, puts on a socially stigmatized identity as her disguise. She mimics neither the normative nor the dominant social position. She displays her stigma to protect herself from her own anxiety and reprisals by men, but she does not pass. In fact, Riviere leaves behind very quickly specific reference to the closet. She comes to the famous conclusion that there is no difference between "genuine womanliness" and the "masquerade." "Whether radical or superficial," Riviere writes, "they are the same thing" (94). In other words, straight and gay women alike (and some men) put on the mask of womanliness, despite the fact that it represents a spoiled identity or "undesired differentness," to apply Goffman's understanding of social stigma (5). Riviere is describing both the ideological pressures on women to subject themselves to men by performing weakness, passivity, and erotic receptivity as well as the unequal gender conditions and accompanying feelings of oppression motivating the performance.[11] The masquerade represents an alternative method of managing social stigma through disguise, one relying not on the imitation of a dominant social role but on the assumption of an identity marked as stigmatized, marginal, or inferior.

Joseph Grigely, a conceptual and visual artist, offers a parallel to the gender masquerade described by Riviere in his own desire at times to masquerade his deafness. He reacts to a recent experience at the Metropolitan Museum of Art where a guard struck him on the shoulder and berated him for not responding the first time to a command that he stop sitting on the floor: "I look into a mirror at myself, search for my deafness, yet fail to find it. For some reason we have been conditioned to presume difference to be a visual phenomenon, the body as the locus of race and gender. Perhaps I need a hearing aid, not a flesh-colored one but a red one . . . a signifier that ceremoniously announces itself."[12] Grigely feels compelled to out himself as disabled so that able-bodied people will not be confused, which guarantees at the same time that he will be rendered invisible. Drawing upon Adrienne Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality, we can interpret his feelings as a response to "compulsory able-bodiedness," a logic that presents the able body, according to Robert McRuer, as an ideological norm casting disability as the exception necessary to confirm that norm.[13] Hence the desire that people with disabilities sometimes experience to overcome their invisibility and its attendant violence by exhibiting their impairments, and the paradoxical consequence that they become even more invisible and vulnerable as a result. In fact, according to the logic of compulsory able-bodiedness, the more visible the disability, the greater the chance that the disabled person will be repressed from public view and forgotten. The masquerade shows that disability exists at the same time that it, as masquerade, does not exist.

Although Riviere sometimes stresses the use of the masquerade as a response to injustice and oppression, she tries at the same time to resist this conclusion in favor of a narrower psychoanalytic explanation. She gives the classic psychoanalytic reading of œdipal rivalry in which unresolved personal conflicts torment the individual with anxiety while providing a vivid picture of what it must have been like to be a woman competing with men in early twentieth-century intellectual circles. She is acutely aware of the closed nature of these circles, of the daily parade of potentially hostile doctors and lawyers faced by any woman who dared enter there, because she had direct experience of it in her own life. Moreover, her patient tells her that she bitterly resents "any assumption" that she is "not equal" to the men around her and rejects "the idea of being subject to their judgment or criticism" (93). Riviere, however, does not allow that feelings of inequality and rejection of them should figure as part of her patient's social reality.[14] Womanliness is merely a symptom of internal psychic conflicts originating in early family life.

More importantly, when Riviere makes the famous leap generalizing the masquerade as a condition of femininity, she must also generalize the situation of the woman in the case study. The woman is one among many women with this problem, potentially one among all women, for she displays "well-known manifestations of the castration complex" (97). The reference to castration is crucial because it introduces a slippage between the categories of woman and disabled person. The castrated body, though imaginary, is read as a disabled body, with the result that all women are figured by psychoanalysis as disabled.[15] Moreover, Riviere's description of her patient's underlying motives for the masquerade as "sadism," "rivalry," and the desire for "supremacy" attributes her behavior to psychological disability rather than political action or social protest (98–9).

"Rivalry" and the desire for "supremacy" are infelicitous formulations for the need to protest against inequality and subjugation. They remind one of phrases often used today to characterize marginalized groups as "schools of resentment" or as bound by "wounded attachments."[16] The problem is especially aggravating in the case of people with disabilities because their calls for justice have so often been dismissed as special pleading by selfish or resentful individuals who claim to be the exception to every rule and care nothing for what is best for the majority. Better to use a political vocabulary, I insist, that attacks assumptions of inequality and rejects the idea that one should be categorically subjected to others because of individual psychology or ability.[17]

## III.

Successful political explanations avoid single and simple axioms in favor of respect for the complexity of human behavior. The world of politics will never be other than a messy place, no matter how much we think we know and how much experience we garner. If the reasons for disability masquerading are political, they cannot be reduced to simple laws but must be tracked through examples, descriptions, and narratives that establish greater awareness about the everyday existence of people with disabilities as well as attack the history of their misrepresentation. The task is not easy because there are few stories available told from the point of view of the disability community, and the desire to repress disability is powerful in our society. But if Tom Shakespeare is right, it is crucial to explore the range of possibilities defining disability identity. He argues that a qualitative difference exists between disability identities that claim disability and those that do not. Attempts to pass create temporary or compromised identities costly to individual happiness and safety while positive disability identities, often linked to "coming-out," reject oppression and seek to develop new narratives of the self and new political forms.[18]

Greater awareness about disability identity requires both the ability to abstract general rules on the basis of one's experience and to recognize that one's experience differs from that of others. The challenge is to find a rhetorical form that satisfies theoretical, practical, and political requirements. Narratives about disability identity are theoretical because they posit a different experience that clashes with how social existence is usually constructed and recorded. They are practical because they often contain solutions to problems experienced by disabled and nondisabled people alike. They are political because they offer a basis for identity politics, allowing people with different disabilities to tell a story about their common cause. The story of this common cause is also the story of a constitutive outside that reveals a great deal about what any given society contains. For example, when a disabled body moves into a social space, the lack of fit exposes the shape of the normative body for which the space was originally designed. Disabled identities make a difference, and in making this difference, they require a story that illuminates the society in which they are found.

Identities are a means of inserting persons into the social world. They are narrative responses to and creations of social reality, aiding cooperation between people, representing significant theories about the construction of the real, and containing useful information about how human beings should make their appearance in the world.[19] Disability identities would seem to be the exception to this rule: they are perceived as a bad fit, their relation to society is largely negative, and so, it would seem, is their theoretical value. In fact, the reverse may be true. While people with disabilities have little power in the social world, their identities possess great theoretical power because they reflect perspectives capable of illuminating the ideological blueprints used to construct social reality.[20] "Some identities," as Paula Moya puts it, "can be more politically progressive than others *not* because they are 'transgressive' or 'indeterminate' but because they provide us with a critical perspective from which we can disclose the complicated workings of ideology and oppression."[21]

The problem, of course, is to move from theoretical to political power, to find a way to use critical knowledge about society to effect political transformation. The masquerade, I have been suggesting, claims disability as a way to manage the stigma of social difference, but I will now tell stories about the politics of this strategy. The six narratives that follow are designed to provide a fuller, though still admittedly incomplete, description of the theoretical and political implications of disability masquerade. Each narrative takes the form of a fable, with the political moral appended at the beginning rather than the end of the story. Narratives one through four explore the benefits of the masquerade for people with disabilities. The fifth and sixth narratives show the disadvantages of this practice.

*The masquerade may inflect private and public space, allowing expression of a public view of disability for political ends.* Consider the example of the Capitol protest for the Americans with Disabilities Act in the spring of 1990. Three dozen wheelchair users, representing ADAPT (American Disabled for Accessible Public Transit, a public transportation advocacy group for people with disabilities), abandoned their chairs to crawl up the eighty-three marble steps of the Capitol building.[22] None of the protestors, I suspect, made a practice of crawling up the steps of public buildings on a regular basis. When they did, they participated in a masquerade for political ends. The network news cameras could not resist the sight of paraplegics dragging themselves up the Capitol steps. Some activists worried that the coverage pictured the image most people with disabilities want to avoid—that they are pitiable, weak, and childlike—and concluded that assuming this identity was not worth the publicity. Predictably, in fact, the cameras picked out exhausted, eight-year-old Jennifer Keelan for special attention, twisting the emphasis from the concerns of adults to those of children and suggesting that ADAPT was taking advantage of children for its cause. At the end of the day, however, the major networks stressed the important message that people with disabilities were demanding their civil rights.

*The masquerade may serve as a form of communication, either between people sharing the same disability or as a message to able-bodied people that a disabled person is in their midst.* "Stigma symbols have the character of being continuously available for perception," Goffman explains. "Fleeting offerings of evidence may be made—purposeful slips, as it were—as when a blind person voluntarily commits a clumsy act in the presence of newcomers as a way of informing them about his stigma" (101). Voluntary slips and disclosures always involve self-presentation, and when not an act of private communication between people with disabilities, they may serve a variety of purposes. They may send a sign to authority figures, who have a habit of swooping down violently without first asking questions, that the object of their attention requires a different mode of address. It is this strategy that tempts Joe Grigely when he ponders whether he should wear a red hearing aid to help manage the rudeness of people around him. Megan Jones details the strategy at greater length.[23] Legally blind and hearing impaired, she now uses a white cane in addition to a guide dog after having been assaulted many times by restaurant owners and other people for bringing her dog into forbidden places. Most people do not recognize her dog as a guide dog because of its breed, but the addition of the white cane allows her blindness and the use of her dog to register. Of course, such tactics do not always have the desired effect. Voluntary disclosure and exaggerated self-presentation may not be sufficient to render disability visible since the public is adept at ignoring people with disabilities. Authority figures will attack people for "faking" their disability, and if they are in fact exaggerating it, what stance can they take? The strategy is dangerous because it risks inflaming the anger of a public already irritated with disabled people.

*The masquerade may contravene an existing system of oppression.* Reasons for the masquerade can be as simple as preserving energy and as complicated as making a joke or protest at the expense of the able-bodied. "Piqued at continuing to inconvenience myself," Irving Zola reports, "I began to regularly use a wheelchair" for excursions to the airport. "I thought that the only surprise I'd encounter would be the dubious glances of other passengers, when after reaching my destination, I would rise unassisted and walk briskly away."[24] Zola is able to make his way through the airport at the beginning and end of trips, but the overuse of energy may mean that he will not have enough strength later in the day or the next day to meet his obligations. He turns to the wheelchair because traveling requires overcompensation, and people with disabilities are never more disabled than when they are overcompensating. "Just because an individual *can* do something physical," Zola argues, "does not mean that he *should*" (Zola's italics, 232). The wheelchair allows him to claim disability, refusing both overcompensation and the ideological requirement that everyone be as able-bodied as possible.

Airports and other public places unfriendly to people with disabilities also present a host of emotional obstacles in addition to physical ones. Zola mentions the "angry glances" of fellow travelers when he climbs staircases "too slowly" or impedes "the rush to seats on a bus" (209). As a person with a disability, he attracts the anger and hatred of people around him. He becomes their "cripple," a disdainful blemish on society and disruptive to the normal way of life. His disability is the cause of his inability to be part of society and its hatred of him. By using the wheelchair, he disrupts the cause-and-effect logic used to humiliate him on a daily basis. He discovers a creative solution, one that adjusts his needs to his environment and changes the psychology of the situation to his advantage. The masquerade, of course, does not necessarily change how people respond to him—he is now a wheelchair user getting in the way—but it does introduce a disruption in the causal logic of humiliation because Zola's identity is masked prophylactically and therefore unavailable to public disdain. He is not who they think he is. He is not where they think he is. He is a target on wheels.

The reverse side of the demand that disabled people overcompensate in public, both to meet the expectations of able-bodied people and to save them from inconvenience, is the masquerade. It meets the demand for overcompensation with undercompensation. Zola's use of the wheelchair improvises on his previous experience with the inaccessibility of public transportation and the reluctance of the general population to acknowledge the problem. His masquerade favors independence and self-preservation.

*The masquerade may put expectations and prejudices about disability in the service of disabled people.* Social prejudices about disability are rigid, and often people with disabilities are required to make their bodies conform to these expectations. As Goffman reports, the able-bodied "expect the cripple to be crippled; to be disabled and helpless: to be inferior to themselves, and they will become suspicious and insecure if the cripple falls short of these expectations" (110). Cal Montgomery provides examples of how actual behaviors contradict expectations about disability: "The person who uses a white cane when getting on the bus, but then pulls out a book to read while riding; the person who uses a wheelchair to get into the library stacks but then stands up to reach a book on a high shelf. . . . [T]he person who challenges the particular expectations of disability that other people have is suspect. 'I can't see what's wrong with him,' people say, meaning, 'He's not acting the way I think he should.'"[25] The masquerade may be used to expose false expectations, or it may use expectations to make life easier for the disabled person.

Prostheses play a crucial role in this process because they serve as indices of disability. Indexical signs, being denotative rather than connotative, point to other meanings, thereby summoning the array of representations signifying any given social practice or object of knowledge. These representations often have an ideological content, existing outside the awareness of society and supporting clichés and stereotypes. Montgomery captures the relation between disability and the indexical property of prostheses with great simplicity and vividness: "When nondisabled people look at 'the disabled,'" he explains, "they see wheelchairs and picture-boards. They see helmets and hearing aids and white canes. With a few exceptions, they don't pick up on how individuals differ from one another; they notice the tools we use. And these tools, to the general public, equal 'disability.' Venture out without a well-known tool, and your disability is 'invisible' or 'hidden.'"[26]

People with disabilities risk becoming their prostheses, Montgomery worries, and this symbolism is demoralizing. But it also provides a resource for changing the meaning of disability. On the one hand, prosthetics tends to establish a law of substitution, diverting attention away from the disabled organ to its replacement. Kenny Fries reports that his crippled legs attract more attention than those of a friend who uses crutches. "I have noticed," he writes, "that although he walks with crutches his legs do not call the same kind of attention to him as mine do, as if the crutches serve as a satisfying explanation for the different way he walks."[27] People in the street ask Fries what is wrong with him and ignore his companion, suggesting that uninvited stares are diverted to prostheses, absorbed there, and satisfied, while disabled limbs spark endless curiosity and anxiety. On the other hand, the powerful symbolic connection between disability and prosthetics allows those who improvise on the use of their prosthesis to tinker with the social meaning of their disability. Anne Finger recounts her experience with a new kind of motorized wheelchair, as yet unfamiliar to most passersby: "People were forever stopping me on the street and saying, 'What is that?' When I said, 'a wheelchair,' they would invariably smile very broadly, say, 'I'm sorry,' and move backwards."[28] The instant the new machine is named as a "wheelchair," it assumes its indexical quality as a sign of disability, and people, who moments before approached its user with a sense of curiosity, back away with a sense of dread.

Of course, Finger could have represented her wheelchair in a way resistant to prejudices about disability. In fact, users may work the meaning of their disability by using different applications of their prosthesis. Jaclyn Stuart switches between prosthetic hands, depending on the effect she wants to achieve. She wears a nonfunctional, rubber cosmetic hand to avoid stares of revulsion in some intimate public situations: “I wear it when I go dancing because otherwise [if I wear my hook] the whole dance floor goes crazy!” But she views her hook prosthesis as a symbol of liberation from normalization: “[W]hen I see the hook, I say, boy, what a *bad* broad. And that’s the look I like best.”[29] Wooden crutches rather than forearm crutches may allow their user to “fly under the radar,” avoiding prejudices against people with long-term disabilities and assuming “visitor status” among the sick. People who require assistance walking participate at times in a complex semiotics of canes, using different types to mark themselves according to received ideas about age, gender, sex, and character types. The purposeful misapplication of prostheses introduces a temporary confusion in the public mind, allowing users a brief moment of freedom in which to assert their independence and individuality.

*Many representations of people with disabilities, however, use narrative structures that masquerade disability for the benefit of the able-bodied public.* Human-interest stories display voyeuristically the physical or mental disability of their heroes, making the defect emphatically present, often exaggerating it, and then wiping it away by reporting about how it has been overcome, how the heroes are “normal,” despite the powerful odds against them. At other times, a story will work so hard to make its protagonist “normal” that it pictures the disabled person as possessing talents and abilities only dreamed about by able-bodied people. In other words, the hero is—simultaneously and incoherently—“cripple” and “supercripple.” This image of disability belongs to the masquerade because it serves a larger ideology requiring the exaggeration of disability, although here it is for the benefit of the able-bodied audience, not the disabled heroes themselves, and this fact makes all the difference. Unlike the cases examined so far, this variety of the masquerade advantages able-bodied society more than disabled people because it affirms the ideology of able-bodiedness. This ideology represses disability by representing the able-body as the baseline in the definition of the human, and because human-interest stories usually require their hero to be human, they are obliged, when the focus is disability, to give an account of their protagonist’s metamorphosis from nonhuman to human being.

Two typical human-interest stories about disabled heroes help to flesh out the ideology informing this type of masquerade. The first gives an account of Herbert M. Greenberg, blind since the age of ten, who founded a human-resources consulting firm, Caliper Management, that gives advice about the personality of job applicants to many famous companies, including the NBA.[30] A mutant strain of tuberculosis took Greenberg's sight in 1940. Public schools turned him away, and other boys beat him up at summer camp. But he was "motivated by adversity" and eventually earned a doctorate in social work from New York University. Nevertheless, most universities were not interested in hiring a blind professor, and after teaching stints in the '50s and '60s, while selling insurance on the side, he developed a psychological test that measures character traits like risk taking, empathy, and resilience. He started Caliper with an associate, and today having administered 1.8 million tests, the firm has a stable of loyal clients.

The first lines of the story connect Greenberg's blindness directly to his ability to assess job applicants fairly: "Blind people can't easily tell if a job candidate is white or black, thin or obese, plain or pretty. So if they should happen to assess an applicant's professional qualifications, they might well focus on a more mundane matter: Is she actually suited for the job?" As the figure of blind justice, Greenberg shows the ability, through his disability, to do what sighted people cannot: he is blind to the prejudices that bias judgment. The figure of the blind judge, however, is merely a trope because it purposefully represses facts about blindness as well as about Greenberg's actual role in the narrative. On the one hand, the story misrepresents blindness as if it blocked all sensory perception. Sight loss, however, exists in different ranges, and blind people can gather a great deal of information about the people around them. Senses other than sight also provide information about the physical, gender, and racial characteristics of people. The story masquerades Greenberg as blinder than he is in order to establish him as the epitome of impartial judgment. On the other hand, Greenberg's other talents, ones able-bodied people do not always possess, make up for his blindness. The story must confirm that he has abilities that compensate for his disability if it is to privilege ability over disability as the ideological baseline of humanness. Despite his blindness, then, Greenberg is supposedly more perceptive than other people. John Gabriel, general manager of the Orlando Magic, introduces this idea when praising the scouting advice of his "blind consultant": "Sometimes analyzing a player involves what you can't see, the intangibles. They may be heart, hustle, drive, determination, leadership. Herb Greenberg can identify those for you."[31] Of course, the fact that Greenberg assesses applicants by psychological test and not personal interview is ignored in order to establish the trope of the totally blind judge who nevertheless has extraordinary powers of perception about the moral and psychological character of other human beings. The story creates a persona for its protagonist that masquerades what disability is.

The second example is a human-interest story recounting the remarkable artistic success, “despite autism,” of Jonathan Lerman, a fourteen-year-old charcoal artist, “retarded with an I.Q. of 53,” who began to draw at age ten “in the way of savants.”[32] His specialty is portraits, although “most autistic artists don’t show faces.” Moreover, one authority has compared the work favorably to portraits by George Grosz and Francis Bacon, “without the horror and shame.” “Raising him was heartbreaking,” his mother reports, because of his uncontrollable and baffling behavior. At the lakeside he stepped on the bodies of sunbathers, as if they were part of the beach; he took food from other people’s plates at restaurants without asking; and he refused to eat pizza with oregano and cheese bubbles. His artistic gifts are equally puzzling, the story continues, since “science is still struggling to understand what two Harvard neurologists have called ‘the pathology of superiority,’ the linkage of gift and disorder that explains how someone unable to communicate or perform simple tasks can at the same time calculate astronomical sums or produce striking music or art.” In short, Lerman’s disability and ability, the story asks the reader to believe, are well beyond the normal range of experience.

The general, descriptive phrase, “pathology of superiority,” sums up nicely the paradox of human-interest stories about disability. The obligatory shift from disability to superability that characterizes the stories serves to conflate pathology with claims of exceptional talent. Each sentence in the story about Lerman carries the burden of this paradox. Here is, for example, an apparently simple and straightforward portrait of the artist as a young man with a disability: “Flowing from Jonathan’s clutched charcoal, five and ten sheets at a sitting, came faces of throbbing immediacy, harrowing and comical.”[33] Lerman cannot hold his charcoal but clutches it. His works of art seem to flow not from his talent but from his disability. Words like “clutched” and “throbbing” lend pathology to his behavior, contaminating the more familiar language about artistic inspiration and talent. His ability is rendered dubious as a result, but not less dubious than his disability, because both rely on the masquerade.

Not surprisingly, what distinguishes Lerman’s drawings from other works of art is what attracts and disturbs art lovers the most. The portraits, like many examples of art brut, are “uncooked by cultural influences.”[34] They pass the test of originality because they diverge from cliché, but since their origin is unfathomable, they also seem unnerving. John Thomson, chairman of the art department at Binghamton University, captures succinctly the contradictory impulse that this story attaches to Lerman—an impulse that marks him simultaneously as normal and abnormal. His work "would not be out of place in my classroom," Thomson explains, but it is also "really exceptional, characterized by an amazing lack of stereotypes common to drawings at all age levels." Similarly, the story takes pains to tell its readers that one of Lerman's idols is rock star Kurt Cobain, that his drawings are beginning to include references to sex and MTV, while stressing repeatedly how far removed he is from normal society. The punch line describes the young artist's happiness, despite his supposedly diminished capacity to be happy, with the fact that people love his art, suggesting some kind of breakthrough produced by his artistic abilities: "To what extent Jonathan knows the hit he has made is not clear. 'Jonathan's capacity to understand is not that great,' Mrs. Lerman said. 'I said, "People really love your art," and he was happy.'"

Human-interest stories do not focus as a rule on people with disabilities who fail to show some extraordinary ability. Blind women who run at Olympic pace, talented jazz musicians with Tourette's syndrome, deaf heart surgeons, or famous actors with a stutter are the usual stuff of these narratives. In each case, ability trumps disability, creating a morality tale about one person's journey from disease to cure, from inhumanity to humanity. These accounts fit with the masquerade because they exaggerate the disability of their heroes, suggesting that it is a mask that can be easily removed to uncover the real human being beneath. But they also exaggerate in the process the connection between able-bodiedness and humanness, giving happy relief and assurance to those who consider themselves healthy.

Imagine if health were really the hallmark of one's humanity, if it were in fact possible to go through life without ever being sick. The result would be unbelievable and undesirable, and yet it is exactly what many stories about disability ask us to believe and to desire: "What would it be like for [a] person to go through life never being sick?" Anne Finger asks. "A man or woman of steel, a body impervious to disease, never facing those deaths of the old physical self that are a sort of skin-shedding" (43).

*A final variety of the masquerade, related to the type informing human-interest stories about people with disabilities, I call "disability drag." It, too, represses disability.* Drag, of course, lines up oddly with passing, but the masquerade does as well, so it may be productive to consider the masquerade in the light of drag. The best cases of disability drag are found in those films in which an able-bodied actor plays disabled. I make reference to drag because the performance of the able-bodied actor is usually as bombastic as a drag performance. Esther Newton argues that drag queens represent the "stigma of the gay world" because they make the stigma most visible (3). While there are certain people with disabilities who embody the stigma of disability more visibly than others—and the masquerade permits the exaggeration of disability by people with disabilities—the most obvious markings of disability as a spoiled identity occur in the performances of able-bodied actors. The modern cinema often puts the stigma of disability on display, except that films exhibit the stigma not to insiders by insiders, as is the usual case with drag, but to a general public that does not realize it is attending a drag performance. In short, when we view an able-bodied actor playing disabled, we have the same experience of exaggeration and performance as when we view a man playing a woman.[35] Audiences, however, rarely recognize the symmetry. Dustin Hoffman does not pass as a woman in *Tootsie* (1982). Nor does he pass as disabled in *Rain Man* (1988). Audiences nevertheless have entirely different reactions to the two performances—they know the first performance is a fake but accept the second one as Oscar worthy—and yet Hoffman's performance in *Rain Man* is as much a drag performance as his work in *Tootsie.* In fact, the narrative structures of the two films are the same. In *Rain Man*, Hoffman's character, Raymond, may be an autistic savant, but it is his brother Charlie who cannot relate to other people. Among Raymond's many gifts is his ability to pull Charlie out of his "autism" and teach him how to love and trust other people. Similarly, Hoffman's character in *Tootsie* puts himself in touch with his feminine side by doing drag, but his real accomplishment is to teach the women of America to stand up for themselves and to embrace their femininity as a strength, not a disability.

*I Am Sam* (2002) provides another more recent use of disability drag. Some critics have praised the film as an accurate representation of "mental retardation." It has actors with disabilities in supporting roles, including one with Down's syndrome. Sean Penn, however, plays Sam, a man with the intelligence of a seven-year-old trying to retain custody of his seven-year-old, able-bodied daughter, Lucy. Regardless of the power of his Oscar-nominated performance, it is difficult to agree that the film portrays disability accurately because accuracy does not lie only in the performance of actors but in the overall narrative structure and plot of films, and here the film fails miserably. Its use of music as a commentary on disability stigmatizes Sam, and the film creates scene after scene designed to set him apart as a freak. The final scene is paradigmatic of how the film treats him. It is a happy and triumphant scene staged at a soccer game at which the community is celebrating the fact that Sam has finally won custody of Lucy. Incomprehensibly, Sam appears as the referee of the soccer match. This plot twist places him in the action of the game but magnifies his disability by contrasting it with the duties usually performed by a referee. Instead of officiating the game and striving to be neutral in his calls, he cheers on Lucy, pursuing her all over the field, and when she scores a goal, he lifts her into his arms and runs in giddy circles, while an excited troop of children chase him and the adults whoop and cheer on the sidelines.

The advantage of disability drag is that it prompts audiences to embrace disability. Its disadvantage is that disability appears as a facade overlaying able-bodiedness. The use of able-bodied actors, whose bombastic performances represent their able-bodiedness as much as their pretence of disability, not only keeps disability out of public view but transforms its reality and its fundamental characteristics. It renders disability invisible because able-bodied people substitute for people with disabilities, similar to white performers who put on blackface at minstrel shows or to straight actors who play “fag” to bad comic effect. As a result, the audience perceives the disabled body as a sign of the acting abilities of the performer—the more disabled the character, the greater the ability of the actor. Disability drag also transforms disability by insinuating ability into its reality and representation. When actors play disabled in one film and able-bodied in the next, the evolution of the roles presents them as cured of a previous disease or condition. The audience also knows that an actor will return to an able-bodied state as soon as the film ends.[36] Disability drag is a variety of the masquerade, then, providing an exaggerated exhibition of people with disabilities but questioning both the existence and permanence of disability. It acts as a lure for the fantasies and fears of able-bodied audiences and reassures them that the threat of disability is not real, that everything was only pretend—unlike the masquerade used by people with disabilities, where the mask, once removed, reveals the reality and depth of disability existing beneath it.

## IV.

Disability activists are fond of pointing out that there are a thousand ways to be disabled but that able-bodied people are all alike.

This is true only metaphorically, of course, since variation thrives in every facet of human existence, but it is worth emphasizing because the ideology of able-bodiedness makes a powerful call on everyone in society to embrace uniformity. The desire to pass is a symptom of this call. The hope of those who try to pass is that no one will have anything different to say about them. Passing compels one to blend in, to be the same, to be normal. Barry Adam asserts that passing supports the "general inequality" of society with the promise of opportunity but benefits very few people in the final analysis.[37] Those who pass improve their own life, but they fail to change the existing system of social privilege and economic distribution. They may win greater acceptance and wealth but only by pretending to be someone they are not and supporting the continued oppression of the group to which they do belong.

The masquerade counteracts passing, claiming disability rather than concealing it. Exaggerating or performing difference, when that difference is a stigma, marks one as a target, but it also exposes and resists the prejudices of society. The masquerade fulfills a desire to tell a story about disability, often the very story that society does not want to hear because it refuses to obey the ideology of able-bodiedness. It may stress undercompensation when overcompensation is required, or present a coming out of disability when invisibility is mandatory. As a consequence, the masquerade produces what Adam calls "overvisibility," a term of disparagement aimed at minority groups who appear to be "too much" for society to bear but also a phenomenon that nevertheless carries potential for political action (49). Women who make demands on men are "too pushy." African Americans are "too boisterous" and "too noisy" around white people. Gay men are "too flashy" and "too effeminate" for straight taste. People with disabilities should stay out of sight because able-bodied society finds them "too ugly." Overstated differences and feigned disabilities serve as small conspiracies against oppression and inequality. They subvert existing social conventions, and they contribute to the solidarity of marginal groups by seizing control of stereotypes and resisting the pressure to embrace norms of behavior and appearance.

The masquerade exists in two perspectives, the point of view of the disabled and the nondisabled. The first tells a story to the second, but each side expresses a desire, the desire to see disability as other than it is. The question is whether it is the same desire on both sides, whether there are resources for interfering with the desire to pass, whether other stories exist. The masquerade presents us with the opportunity to explore alternative narratives, to ask what happens when disability is claimed as some version of itself rather than simply concealed from view.

## NOTES

1. On the rhetoric of coming out as a person with a disability, see Brenda Jo Brueggemann, "'It's So Hard to Believe That You Pass': A Hearing-Impaired Student Writing on the Borders of Language" and "On (Almost) Passing," in *Lend Me Your Ear: Rhetorical Constructions of Deafness* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1999), 50–80, 81–99; Brenda Jo Brueggemann and Georgina Kleege, "Gently Down the Stream: Reflections on Mainstreaming," *Rhetoric Review* 22, no. 2 (2003): 174–84; Georgina Kleege, "Disabled Students Come Out: Questions without Answers," in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities,* ed. Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York: MLA, 2002) , 308–16; Rod Michalko, *The Mystery of the Eye and the Shadow of Blindness* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998); and Mitchell Tepper, "Coming Out as a Person with a Disability," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1999): 105–6. On the limits of coming-out discourse, see Ellen Jean Samuels, "My Body, My Closet: Invisible Disability and the Limits of Coming-Out Discourse," *GLQ* 9, no. 1–2 (2003): 233–55.

2. Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963). Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

3. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 72. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

4. Linda Greenhouse, "High Court Limits Who is Protected by Disability Law," *New York Times,* June 23, 1999, A1, A16.

5. See Janet E. Halley, *Don't: A Reader's Guide to the Military's Anti-Gay Policy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

6. Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 213–36. Williams theorizes staring, playing on the difference between being visible and being recognized. She notes that as a black woman she is highly marked and socially invisible at the same time. In fact, it is the heightened visibility of her blackness that produces her social invisibility.

7. See also Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). Newton provides a counterexample, explaining that drag queens represent the shame of the gay world because they most visibly embody the stigma (3). Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

8. Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," in *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, ed. Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 37–49. The essays in María Carla Sánchez and Linda Schlossberg, eds., *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2001) discuss passing as a method of establishing alternative narratives. Judith Butler is also important to the theory of passing. For consideration of her work in the context of disability studies, see Ellen Jean Samuels, "Critical Divides: Judith Butler's Body Theory and the Question of Disability," *NWSA Journal* 14, no. 3 (2002): 58–76; Tobin Siebers, "Disability in Theory: From Social Construction to the New Realism of the Body," *American Literary History* 13, no. 4 (2001): 737–54; and Siebers, "Disability and the Future of Identity Politics," in *Redefining Identity Politics,* ed. Linda Martín Alcoff, Satya Mohanty, and Paula Moya (New York: Palgrave-MacMillan, forthcoming). See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble:*

*Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

9. Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," in *The Inner World and Joan Riviere: Collected Papers: 1920–1958,* ed. Athol Hughes (London: Karnac Books, 1991), 90–101, originally published in the *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 9 (1929): 303–13. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

10. A good introduction to the complexities of racial passing is Adrian Piper, "Passing for White, Passing for Black," *Transition* 58 (1992): 4–32, 18. For other important treatments of racial passing, see Deborah E. McDowell, introduction to *Quicksand and Passing,* by Nella Larson (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986); Phillip Brian Harper, "Gender Politics and the 'Passing' Fancy: Black Masculinity as Societal Problem," in *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 103–26; Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Richard Dyer, "White," *Screen* 29, no. 4 (1988): 44–64; and Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000). It is worth mentioning that the idea of achieving "color-blind" or "race-blind" societies needs someday to be interrogated from a disability perspective alert to the metaphor of blindness.

11. A number of theorists have described the masquerade as a strategy that manages stigma by creating effects subversive to male power. See Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator," *Screen* 23, no. 3–4 (1982): 74–87 and its sequel, "Masquerade Reconsidered: Further Thoughts on the Female Spectator," *Discourse* 11 (1988–9): 42–54; Teresa de Lauretis, "Feminist Studies/Critical Studies: Issues, Terms, and Contexts," in *Feminist Studies, Critical Studies,* ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 1–19, esp. 17; Terry Castle, *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnivalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986); and Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), esp. 10.

12. Joseph Grigely, "Postcards to Sophie Calle," in *The Body Aesthetic: From Fine Art to Body Modification,* ed. Tobin Siebers (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 17–40, 28.

13. See Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *Women: Sex and Sexuality,* ed. Catharine R. Stimpson and Ethel Spector Person (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 62–91; and Robert McRuer, "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence," in Snyder et al., *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities,* 88–99.

14. Of course, Riviere may be masquerading herself. See Stephen Heath, "Joan Riviere and the Masquerade," in *Formations of Fantasy,* ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan (London: Methuen, 1986), 45–61.

15. See Sigmund Freud, "Some Character-Types Met with in Psycho-Analytic Work," in *The Standard Edition*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953–74), 14: 309–33, esp. 315.

16. See Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994); and Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

17. Stephen Heath prefers a political reading as well. He argues that the woman "puts on a show of the femininity" demanded by her male colleagues as a "charade of power" designed to meet masculine authority with its own fantasies and fears of woman (56). He places the masquerade not in the context of sadism and rivalry but in the context of "sexual politics" and "protest" (56).

18. See Tom Shakespeare, "Disability, Identity, Difference," in *Exploring the Divide: Illness and Disability,* ed. Colin Barnes and Geof Mercer (Leeds: Disability Press, 1996), 94–113, esp. 100; Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); and Robert McRuer, "As Good as It Gets: Queer Theory and Critical Disability," *GLQ* 9, no. 1–2 (2003): 79–105.

19. On the theoretical value of identity, see Tobin Siebers, *Morals and Stories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), esp. chaps. 2 and 4.

20. On the use of disability identity to illuminate the social construction of reality, see Tobin Siebers, "Disability and the Future of Identity Politics" and "Social Facts: One or Two Things We Know about Disability," paper, "Redefining Identity Politics: Internationalism, Feminism, Multiculturalism," University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, October 18, 2002.

21. Paula M. L. Moya, *Learning from Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 27 (Moya's italics).

22. For an account of the protest events, see Joseph Shapiro, *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1993), 131–41.

23. Megan Jones, "'Gee, You Don't *Look* Handicapped . . .' Why I Use a White Cane to Tell People I'm Deaf," *Electric Edge* (July/August 1997), http://www.ragged-edge-mag.com/archive/look.htm (accessed March 18, 2004).

24. Irving Zola, *Missing Pieces: A Chronicle of Living with a Disability* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 205. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

25. References are to Cal Montgomery, "A Hard Look at Invisible Disability," *Ragged Edge Magazine Online* 2 (2001), http://www.ragged-edge-mag.com/0301/0301ft1.htm (accessed on March 17, 2004).

26. Ibid.

27. Kenny Fries, *Body, Remember: A Memoir* (New York: Blume, 1998), 110.

28. Anne Finger, *Past Due: A Story of Disability, Pregnancy and Birth* (Seattle, WA: Seal Press, 1990), 26. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

29. Cited by Marilynn J. Phillips, "Damaged Goods: Oral Narratives of the Experience of Disability in American Culture," *Social Science and Medicine* 30, no. 8 (1990): 849–57, 855 (Phillips's italics).

30. References are to Geoffrey Brewer, "Oh, the Psyches and Personalities He Has Seen," *New York Times,* April 19, 2000, C10.

31. Ibid.

32. References are to Ralph Blumenthal, "An Artist's Success at 14, Despite Autism," *New York Times,* January 16, 2002, E1.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. Disability drag also invites connections to drag kinging. See Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 231–66, and "Oh Behave! Austin Powers and the Drag Kings," *GLQ* 7, no. 3 (2001): 425–52, esp. 427.

36. Deborah Marks, *Disability: Controversial Debates and Psychosocial Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1999), 160, suggests that the real reason for using nondisabled actors for disabled parts is to reassure the audience that disability is not real.

37. Barry D. Adam, *The Survival of Domination: Inferiorization and Everyday Life* (New York: Elsevier, 1978), 119. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.