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SICK GIRLS: GENDER, DISABILITY, AND CYBORG HOAXES

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The story, told and retold, has become an academic urban legend. Its outline is as follows: a male psychiatrist, Alex, entered online spaces under an assumed identity as a woman with a disability, “Joan,”¹ described by Sherry Turkle as “severely handicapped and disfigured,” and unable therefore to leave the house or meet people in person,² and by Jodi O'Brien as having damaged “speech and motor coordination.”³ “Joan” conversed with and gained the trust of many women, offered therapy, and engaged in cybersex or set up dates between these women and her “friend” Alex. Eventually, the strain of passing under an assumed identity became too much for Alex, who decided to kill “Joan.” When he posted that she was ill, those who befriended her attempted to contact hospitals and send their condolences, only to find that she did not exist. Those who considered Joan a friend experienced shock, betrayal and outrage at the deception.

As an urban legend—always a moralizing genre—the lesson is clear. We must be wary of the truthfulness of those we encounter online, as they may easily be deceptive. Although many internet scholars took up the case of “Joan” in relation to gender, sexuality, postmodern identity and online disembodiment, analysis of the place of disability was sorely lacking.⁴ This cyborg hoax—linking embodiment, gender, technology, representation, emotion, and data—was equally indebted to ideologies of ability that figure disability as deficit to be “cured” through technology or other interventions.

Gerard Goggin and Christopher Newell refer to a “lacuna” within internet studies where disability is concerned⁵; this paper combines a critical review of internet studies literature featuring “Joan” with theories of normalcy drawn from disability studies and with contemporary cases of gender and disability deception. Ultimately, I argue that disability may be used as a category of critical analysis through which it is possible to resist the normalizing pressures of new media interfaces and structures, and to theorize new media in its variable configurations rather than through generalities.

Disability studies has as its mission the politicized revelation of the ways in which a normative, able body is used as a default basis for various forms of social, cultural, and material interaction. Gender and disability theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson

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coined the term “normate” to refer to a privileged body, without stigma, that functions as a universal type in a given society.⁶ Frequently, the normate body is hailed and produced through the preferred user positions of new media. These are cultural, material, and social factors that enable an individual to take up the user position as it is “intended” to be inhabited, using the tools, engaging in the activities, and reproducing the ideologies that are part and parcel of the design and use of digital media such as internet applications, cell phones, streaming video, and multiple other forms of mediated interaction. Although deceptions involving sick or disabled women may seem to destabilize the preferred user position, they may also further marginalize embodied disability identities in digital media by casting doubt upon their veracity and burying their technocultural experiences beneath stereotype.

A second, more recent, case may prove instructive. In January 2013, it was revealed that Notre Dame football star Manti Te’o had been the victim of a hoax; his “inspirational” girlfriend, who died within hours of his grandmother, was revealed to be a fictional construction. The girl, Lennay Kekua, was reportedly in a major car accident and then diagnosed with leukemia, undergoing a bone transplant before dying in September 2012. In 2013, it was revealed that this relationship had occurred only in mediated forms, through social media and cell phone communication, and had been elaborately orchestrated by Ronaiah Tuiasosopo.⁷ Once again, we see a representation of a woman in a state of unhealth turning to digital media as a social, and romantic, solution.

Once again, it is orchestrated by a man, for unclear purposes. It is reminiscent of come-and-marry schemes, involving young men taking on feminine identities in order to make connections with (and receive money or gifts from) men abroad.⁸ Was Tuiasosopo attempting to benefit from Te’o’s rising star? There is also an element of trolling, which Judith Donath defines as “a game of identity deception” undertaken at the expense of the target.⁹

If this is a kind of game, why is presenting as a disabled young woman a winning move? First, it draws upon longstanding representations of what Martin Norden calls “the innocent,” a young person, usually female, whose disability or disease is used to make them appear more vulnerable, more sympathetic, and more morally pure.¹⁰ Secondly, it reinforces utopian visions of digital media as “solving” the problem of disability.¹¹ These strands make it an enormously appealing and familiar representation, pulling at heartstrings and pocketbooks while offering a sense of moral rectitude. But, the short-term success of such deceptions, and their coverage in popular media, also have the effect of perpetuating stereotypes and overshadowing many of the material, political, and experiential dimensions of disability and digital media. As Nakamura argued that racial identity deception often reinforced stereotypes,¹² these gendered portrayals of disability often draw upon and strengthen notions of disability dependence, narratives of overcoming, and ultimately trajectories of tragedy, as these disabled, sick, online girlfriends move towards the end of the deception – death. As these representations are strengthened, they crowd out lived experiences; much as come-and marry schemes (and their cousins, Nigerian bankers) create an atmosphere in which all web users from Africa may be perceived as scammers, the disabled girl has been so often revealed as a fake that all those who present as disabled online come

under scrutiny regarding the authenticity of their identities. Furthermore, as these personas are constructed from a preferred, normate user position, there is a lack of attention to the issues of access, technological accommodation, and personal autonomy that are central to experiences of disability online. Disability – particularly female disability – becomes spectacle, a signifier without a referent, a costume to be taken on and discarded. In the absence of disability analysis, the emptiness of these narratives, and their embeddedness in the normate user position and its exclusions, are not made visible to scholars of new media.

To return to “Joan,” it is notable that its first telling indicated that disabled women were the first to question “Joan,” as her experiences did not ring true.¹³ In ignoring or glossing over this detail, scholars ignored the realities of technological and interpersonal interactions for internet users with disabilities. Inattention to disability in this case and internet studies at large is illustrative of the centrality of a preferred user experience of online media and how it may mask how different identities, bodies, and use conditions might affect theories of deception, identity, community, and new media technologies and their users.

¹ Allucquère Rosanne Stone refers to the psychiatrist as Stanford Lewin, and refers to his assumed online identity as “Julie.” Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1995).

² Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, 1st Touchstone ed. (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 228.

³ Jodi O’Brien, “Writing in the Body: Gender (Re)production in Online Interaction,” in *Communities in Cyberspace*, ed. Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 88.

⁴ See also: Mark Poster, *The Second Media Age* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1995); Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994).

⁵ Gerard Goggin and Christopher Newell, *Digital Disability: The Social Construction of Disability in New Media*, *Critical Media Studies* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 115.

⁶ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997).

⁷ Ilana Gershon, “The Samoan Roots of the Manti Te’o Hoax,” *The Atlantic*, January 24, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/01/the-samoan-roots-of-the-manti-teo-hoax/272486/>.

⁸ Jenna Burrell, *Invisible Users Youth in the Internet Cafés of Urban Ghana* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012).

⁹ Judith Donath, “Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community,” in *Communities in*

Cyberspace, ed. P. Kollack and M. Smith (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 31–56.

¹⁰ Martin F. Norden, *The Cinema of Isolation: a History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (Rutgers University Press, 1994).

¹¹ Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

¹² Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

¹³ Lindsay Van Gelder, “The Strange Case of the Electronic Lover,” in *Computerization and Controversy: Value Conflicts and Social Choices*, ed. Charles Dunlop and Rob Kling (New York, NY: Academic Press, 1996)