Paradigm Citizens: Your Standards or Mine?

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Disability, although highly stigmatized, can be illustrated in numerous ways, and not just as a person in a wheelchair. In The Rejected Body, Susan Wendell asserts that "The lack of realistic cultural representations [...] contributes to the 'Otherness' of people with disabilities" (Wendell 61). As humans we have this personal attribution error which causes us to assume that bad things happen to other people, not because of their environment or ineluctable circumstances, but only because of who they are. Junot Diaz's Drown and The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao also show "individuals whose abnormality [seems to create] their problems, which in itself illustrates the strength of the cultural demand" to fit a specific model, to be a "paradigm citizen" (Wendell 63).

Aside from the stereotypical ideas that are often associated with disability, as a socially constructed handicap, the term "disability" also includes "subtle cultural factors that determine standards of normality" (Wendell 58). This fact is explicitly shown in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao.
Although Beli learned to cope with idea of not being "socially accepted," that was not the case in her early life. "Beli, after all, had been ailing for a while" (Díaz 253). She does not fit in—not in her country, not in her city, not in her house. She is black, very skinny, and alone. She only survives because a distant relative took her in; and even then, while living in one of the worst parts of the Dominican Republic, her neighbors do not even like her, and they lived in the ghetto! In this case, even the lowliest members of society (who also got there title bases upon their own "abnormalities") would "exclude those who do not meet them from full participation in their societies" (Wendell 58). This trend of "otherness" continues throughout Beli's life; as a young adult she is looked upon as a sex machine, only needed by those who required her services, and then as an adult, battling cancer.

Additionally, even when people pursue a "normal" life, conforming to what is "socially accepted," it is evident that they will be seen as a spectacle in the eyes of others. Susan Wendell states, "I do not think my body is a cultural representation, although I recognize that my experience of it is both highly interpreted and very influenced by cultural representations" (62). Although, he does have a physical deformity, Ysrael does strive for a normal life and even overcompensates for his facial deformity by building up the rest of his body to be as attractive as possible. Even while leading a seemingly "normal life," Ysrael suffers from a continuing trend of otherness.

"Many people are hiding in the private sphere because of assumptions that they belong there" (Wendell 63). In Drown, "[Ysrael] has his power of INVISIBILITY and no one can touch him" (Díaz 155). Yunior, the narrator of Drown, romanticizes this idea of Ysrael having some sort of superpower, but it makes me wonder if this "superpower" is a curse in disguise. I call this into question because in the very same paragraph, the narrator tells us that "so many wish him gone." So if he wears a mask and is known as "No Face," does that mean he is unfit to be a part of society?

"The more a society regards disability as a private matter, and people with disabilities as belonging in the private sphere, the more disability it creates by failing to make the public sphere accessible to a wide range of people" (Wendell 60).

Along with Susan Wendell, I "do not want to claim or imply that social factors alone cause all disability"; however, I will assert that those very factors do perpetuate stigmas attached to the term "disability." "Deviations from a society's conception of a 'normal' or acceptable body" are a clear
way of determining a person’s ability to be a part of society. Because much disability is created, Beli and Ysrael suffered from disabling “social conditions,” which did in fact “cause disability given the demands and lack of support in the environments of the people affected” (Wendell 62).

WORKS CITED