

Seminar Paper
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The (Supra)Able and Society: Reading Disabled Athletics Through the Lens of Shelley's *Frankenstein*

The scholarship concerning the importance of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a disability studies and cyborg studies text is extensive. Shelley's creature has fascinated critics for the unique ways it navigates the world as a strange and fantastic "other," terrifying and pitiful at once, simultaneously subjugated and subjugator. This paper will delineate the creature through a disability studies lens mentioned at times, but never fully explored. First, I will review the relevant literature concerning disability in athletics, cyborgs, and Frankenstein's monster. Then I will consider Frankenstein's monster alongside disabled athletes whose cyborg qualities make them superior athletes while causing them to be precluded from "normal" social functions, casting them into a new liminal space created by technology, disability, and cultural paradigms. I argue that it is society's perception of difference and progress that impairs the disabled athlete in athletic spheres, rather than either their disability or the technology they employ. Finally, I will consider how modern culture might move forward harmoniously as cybernetic features in humans become increasingly prevalent in disabled athletics and beyond.

Disability studies has long blazoned disability as an interpretation of "otherness" projected upon bodies defined by their deviance from "cultural rules about what bodies should be or do" (Thomson 6). Rosemaire Thomson posits a sort of continuum created by social expectations of a body's performance in the socially engineered environment in which disability and ordinariness fall in different places

(7). Prosthetic medicine has sought to move disabled people along this continuum by “correcting” function and appearance, “but it enters the realm of biopolitics because it uses the ‘normal’ body as its tribunal and blueprint for action and treats the impaired body as a spoilt entity that must be hidden and corrected” (Hughes 561). In *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, Robert McRuer challenges “compulsory ablebodiedness,” which assumes “that we all agree: able-bodied identities, able-bodied perspectives are preferable and what we all, collectively, are aiming for” (9). Forcibly attempting to include the disabled in the goal of ablebodiedness is not the only kind of disablism they encounter, however. Psycho-emotional barriers appear when a disabled person, experiencing the freedom provided by a wheelchair, for instance, also encounters the social prejudices about the perceived inabilities of wheelchair users, undermining their “emotional well-being, self-esteem and ontological security” (Cromby and Standen, Reeve 97). Psycho-emotional disablism also emerges if people feel obligated to use a prosthetic device or other “normalizing” measure because of others’ reactions to difference. Hiding the “spectre” of difference and disability from view becomes an important skill for navigating society “normally.” Reeve’s choice of the word “spectre” is an important one when considering Frankenstein’s monster, whose primary corporeal deviance is his appearance.

Athletic competitions for the disabled provide a venue for those with impairments to celebrate their differences in an important way. Although the “spectre” of difference is on display rather than hidden, normalizing actions are still performed as athletes take part in the same events as in the Olympics and other

able-bodied competitions. Studies have found that being active and competitive has many benefits:

Participation in sport has many health, social, economic and environmental benefits that encompass self-concept, self-esteem, reduced depressive symptoms, decreased anxiety, improved self-acceptance, changes in anti-social behaviour and enhanced psychological well-being. Sport is of particular importance for improving the quality of life, self-esteem, independence and social integration of people with disabilities. People with disabilities who participate in sport have significantly higher self-esteem and are more present in leadership positions, particularly in the sport industry, than are inactive people with disabilities. (Tynedal and Wolbring 14)

Despite all of the benefits, the struggle of the impaired is not fully ameliorated by sports. Tynedal and Wolbring emphasize that “people with disabilities are more likely to experience attitudinal, social and programmatic barriers that may limit their inclusion in physical activity, fitness, sports, recreation and physical education.” These barriers are often propagated by the media and other writings about the disabled. On the fraught idea of supercrip narratives, Eli Clare writes that “supercrip stories never focus on the conditions that make it so difficult...for disabled kids to play sports. I don’t mean medical conditions. I mean material, social, legal conditions...I mean stereotypes and attitudes. I mean oppression” (2). Indeed, and this difficulty is soundly in place, affecting disabled

athletes even at the highest levels of competition.

The plight of top-tier disabled athletes comes into sharp relief when we consider the counter-intuitive example of double-amputee runners. The advancement of prosthetic leg technology in recent years has enabled exceptional athletes to post times rivaling or bettering those of world class able-bodied athletes. In fact, bilateral runner Oscar Pistorius competed in multiple events at the 2012 Olympic Games. Reeve notes that, “Pistorius with his request (and proven ability) to compete (and win) against non-disabled athletes is ‘encroaching on hallowed ideological territory’” (103). Rather than this “impaired” body reinforcing “the discourses of normal/abnormal because of the way technology (informed by medicine) tends to recreate the ‘normal’ body,” a new wave of disabled athletes are challenging the “everyday understandings of ‘normal.’” By its very nature, cyborg theory seeks to unsettle hegemonies and recreate the definition of ‘normal,’ but the consequences experienced by the actors who do so aren’t always positive. Of Pistorius’ controversial request to enter the 2008 Olympics, Donna Reeve noted “a cyborg anxiety at not only the level of top athletics, but more fundamentally, the implications this could have for body culture and notions of ‘othering’” (104). Notions of “othering” emerge as a core dilemma for society, and this problem is highlighted in a wide range of disabilities.

The realization of advanced technology places cyborgs into a liminal social space where they aren’t truly a part of either the disabled world or the able world. This notion is clearly drawn out by Reeve’s article with the example of cochlear implants. Instead of being able to navigate both hearing and deaf communities

adeptly, users enter a 'twilight zone' between both communities (102). In the same way, bilateral athletes are entering a hybrid zone between disability and ability. Initial anxieties about cyborg athletics in Olympic events circa 2008 and 2012 resurfaced in 2016 when long jump champion Markus Rehm was rejected from the Rio de Janeiro Games when unable to prove his prosthesis didn't give him an advantage (Greenemeier). Additionally, there were no Paralympic athletes in the 2016 Olympics who employed cyborg technology directly in the act of competing. In the realm of track and field, unilateral athletes increasingly feel the disparity between themselves and bilateral athletes, finding it emotionally difficult to continue competing in events they know they will lose ("Technology at Paralympics..."). "Oh, to be bilateral," lamented unilateral U.S. sprinter David Prince in the same article. Bilateral athletes have entered a space where they are "too able" for both the Paralympics *and* the Olympics. P. David Howe argued that "while it is considered an infringement for the able to become too cyborg, for the disabled it is highly advantageous because technology can normalize their 'inferior' bodies to the point where in the case of elite wheelchair racers they can produce super-human results" (878). While this notion may hold true for wheelchair racers, bilateral athletes have revealed that it can also be an infringement for the disabled to become "too cyborg." Howe's argument posits that, like classic supercrip narratives, technology empowers some and "[leaves] the status of others at best unaltered and at worst [increases] their liminality" (880). His argument is built in large part upon economic disparities between competing countries, ultimately implying that technology is becoming a disabling factor, rather than an enabling one. While Reeve

noted that some don't see cyborg theory offering solutions to "the material disadvantage faced by disabled people in society, others see the cyborg as providing a way of understanding the lack of a fixed boundary between disabled and non-disabled people" (91). Reeve takes the cyborg to be both a benefit and a disruptor of normative values. Taking the notion of cyborg-as-benefit even further, Tobin Siebers states: "Prostheses always increase the cyborg's abilities; they are a source only of new powers, never of problems. The cyborg is always more than human – and never risks to be seen as subhuman. To put it simply, the cyborg is not disabled" (63). While this rings true in some cases, or perhaps some ideal world, it does not play out so smoothly in reality. Cyborgs and disability have long been entangled because technology could not create cyborgs that out-performed (or even perfectly mimicked) the "normative" human body they were emulating. Now, however, science has created bodies that are superior (at times) to the blueprint they were designed by and society is subsequently being forced to consider alternative forms of human life.

Reeve theorized a name for this new cyborg: "iCrip represents new ways of being which are (non)disabled and (ab)normal" (106). I argue, that even if only in the realm of athletics, the new "disabled" cyborg can be (supra)abled and (ab)normal. Although prosthetic legs, especially running blades, may be less advantageous off the track field, they provide humanity with a tangible vision of a cyborg future, where the standards for performance are not set by "natural" bodies, but by technological bodies. It's a similar vision to the one created by Shelley in *Frankenstein*, although that vision of the future was excluded, abandoned, and

extinguished because it was too different.

By writing Victor Frankenstein's monster, Shelley wrote a disability narrative that is increasingly important thanks to the work of technology to make a version of the "monster" into a reality—the over-performing cyborg. Sami Schalk synthesized the key elements identified in previous works about supercrip narratives in her work "Reevaluating the Supercrip." She noted that these sensational disability stories always comprise the use of superlative language; close examination and analysis of the body, mind, and behaviors through a scientific lens; continuous comparison of a nondisabled norm; suppression or masking of negative emotions like stress or depression; and emphasis on personal, individualized attributes like will and determination (76-77). Each of these elements becomes apparent again and again in the saga of Victor Frankenstein's contrived monstrosity.

It may be easy to draw parallels to the supercrip narrative, but it is a little more difficult to pinpoint exactly what the creature's disability is. His problems stem mainly from the mere fact that he is unsightly (when compared to the "traditional" human forms present in the novel). This impairment is what initially prohibits him from assimilating with society. It's a clever move by Shelley, intentionally or not—many disabled people find that they function seamlessly in society until their disability is revealed (Mossman). The monster, who cannot keep his "disability" hidden, becomes a striking fictional example of the plight many disabled people experience. He provides a canvas for us to explore why "we must examine the process by which normalcy, taken for granted by definition, is shaped into hegemonic force that requires micro-enforcement at each and every cultural,

somatic, and political site in the culture...People learn themselves through consumed cultural artifacts” (Davis 250). Alongside his unfortunate appearances, the monster is also excluded from social assimilation because he is powerful. He represents why the cyborg’s transgressed boundaries are a threat. Victor, scared of a race of beings more powerful than his own, destroys the possibility for the creature to have a “normal” relationship with one of his own kind and goes to the ends of the Earth to destroy his creation (Shelley 138). When viewed through the lens of disability, the creature quickly becomes the too-able cyborg; a problem for fictional society mirroring the challenges faced by bilateral athletes today.

The social exclusion of bilateral (and other [supra]able) athletes is not merely an issue of being perceived as different. Institutional barriers plays a role alongside social paradigms in excluding these athletes: IPC classification code 5.3 states, “The impairment should limit the Athlete's ability to compete equitably in elite sport with Athletes without impairment” (“IPC Classification Code and International Standards”). Although athletes *have* competed in both the Paralympics and Olympics in the same year, disabled cyborgs increasingly qualify as limited from competing equitably with unimpaired athletes because their prosthesis are regarded as an advantage. In the same way, they are increasingly qualified to compete only against each other, rather than on the field with unilateral athletes as well. This doesn’t seem like it would be a problematic issue, but bilateral and unilateral athletes still share the track (“Technology at Paralympics...”). Another problem is that the Olympics are still perceived as a loftier goal than the Paralympics. Tynedal and Wolbring found that “it has not only been reported as

being a dream for the disabled athlete, but also as a dream for people linked to the athletes, such as coaches, family, spectators and officials of disability sport organizations. Sometimes, the athletes are quoted on how great it would be to compete in the Olympics, when they competed only in the Paralympics” (27). This speaks volumes to the perception of disabled athletics—whether caused by publicity disparities or anything else, the Paralympics is viewed as a less distinguished venue even by its participants. For this reason, it is difficult to blame impaired athletes for aspiring to the Olympics, especially when their race times are equitable or better than those of able-bodied athletes. Dr. Robert Gailey, an associate professor of physical therapy at the University of Miami Medical School who has studied disabled runners, asked an important question during the controversy surrounding Pistorius’ 2008 Olympics bid:

“Are they [the International Association of Athletics Federations] looking at not having an unfair advantage? Or are they discriminating because of the purity of the Olympics, because they don’t want to see a disabled man line up against an able-bodied man for fear that if the person who doesn’t have the perfect body wins, what does that say about the image of man?”

(Longman)

The question has as much potency in 2007 as it does now. The exclusion of disabled athletes from able-bodied competitions amounts to the exclusion of

disabled people from the mainstream of society. Progress is hindered, much in the same way that it was in *Frankenstein*.

Victor Frankenstein's revolutionary scientific discovery was met with unprecedented rejection, especially from Victor. The "many happy and excellent natures" who would owe their being to him had to be destroyed when the new species could not be subjugated and controlled by the traditionally understood "man" (Shelley 36). Mark Mossman asserts that "more than ever, it seems that the novel demonstrates the power of cultural inscription, the way an individual comes to subjectivity through a series of aggressive cultural acts." Cultural inscription, whether of what we should look like or how our bodies should perform, is a powerful tool that reinforces hegemonies throughout society. Because, as Lennard Davis notes, "people learn themselves through consumed cultural artifacts," the image of man that is "the creature" or the "too-abled cyborg" encroaches on scared territory in the story of biopower and a homogenous society (250). Mossman connected the creature to disability with the same tools that previous scholars used to link him to femininity or homosexuality; I link the creature to this new kind of disability, the paradox of the increasingly sophisticated cyborg. Mossman posits that "in the contemporary West there are simply more tools to work with, more experiences to augment narration and the process of self-becoming" in his argument that the creature may actually have been able to assimilate into modern culture. He goes on to claim that "today the creature could have plastic surgery, for example, or use its size and strength to play a professional sport, or use its intellect to manage itself into financial and cultural power." This it would seem, by virtue of the modern

“disabled” cyborg, may not be the case, especially in the case of sports. Indeed, cyborg athletes reinforce in our time David Hirsch’s assertion that

“By seeking inclusion into exclusive structures, [the creature] realizes that his reverent attempts to assimilate disempower him as they reinforce the exclusivity of the closed domestic circle. Asking for similar rights by stressing one’s similarity to a normal structure does little to alter the norm and demands no reciprocal conversion on the part of the one to be persuaded.” (59)

The space occupied by Victor’s creation and today’s disabled athletes is striking. Each is a product of a scientific endeavor to push the boundaries of what is possible, and each is ultimately rejected from full assimilation into society because of what science has made them. While *Frankenstein* is often regarded as a cautionary tale about the dangers of unchecked scientific progress with no thought for its consequences, I would push back against the idea that cyborg athletes represent a line crossed in scientific discovery. It may even be productive to think of their supra-able bodies as one way the function of “disabled” bodies is modified without invoking issues linked to biopolitics and “compulsory ablebodiedness.” The normative standard is no longer fixed in the way it once was. Both the creature and cyborg athletes have their driving goal removed from their grasp. Victor destroys the creature’s chances of a mate, and disabled athletes are prevented from their competitive goals and a full, seamless social integration. In the monster’s case, “the

human senses are insurmountable barriers” to its full acceptance by another person (Shelley 119). To the cyborg athlete, we can substitute “ideal image of man” in for “human senses,” though I would challenge the idea that an ideal image is an insurmountable barrier—change has long been part of our story as a species, if never before so rapidly or obviously as with cyborg technology.

Rather than pushing back against his forced fate of exclusion, the creature comes to accept it, as evinced by his quest for a mate to live with in exclusion. He cannot accept himself as normal, stating to Victor that “[his] companion must be of the same species, and have the same defects” (118). Not only is he made to believe he is defected, but he is conditioned to *seek* exclusion. In the next chapter, the female being he requests becomes “a right which you must not refuse” (118). In fact, his “right” should be inclusion, rather than exclusion, in the social order. Misery from exclusion makes him malicious and malice sends him dangerously down a path of misogyny (119). Victor, equally ensconced in hegemonic mentalities, projects “compulsory ablebodiedness” onto his creature as well. “How can you, who long for the love and sympathy of man, persevere in this exile?” he asks (120). In fact, the creature’s obsession is merely with love and sympathy—Victor assumes that it is his desire to be physically like man, not socially or emotionally like him. The creature might wish to appear differently than he does, but only so that he can be treated equally.

It is important here to distinguish the sort of ethical space the monster inhabits. After all, *Frankenstein* is often read as a cautionary tale against unchecked scientific progress. Does the creature’s existence cross an ethical line? Putting aside

for a moment the use of corpses ill-obtained in his genesis (for this is never mentioned specifically when people object to the creature), it *must* be acceptable for sentient beings who are stronger and better adapted to survival to exist, mustn't it? Hasn't this always been the modus operandi of evolution? What about when they are products of our own creation? It seems more likely that the ethical line is crossed when this created consciousness is abandoned, rather than when he is created. The creature has as much potential to flourish and lead a life worth living as anyone and perhaps more than most; in *Life as Jamie Knows It*, Michael Bérubé makes it clear that disability is *not* inimical to flourishing (175). To call the novel a cautionary tale against unbridled scientific progress (instead of a tale about *responsibility* for one's progressive work or a warning against 'othering') is to imply that it would have been better that the creature never lived at all. But the "creature" that Shelley creates is far too human to comfortably eliminate in this fashion. An ethical standpoint like that dangerously approaches the controversial issue of eugenics in both bioethics and disability studies, and indeed, Victor himself becomes a eugenicist when he destroys his female monster before her inception. To imply that it is acceptable to take into our own hands the assessment of how much of a burden or a gift to society a particular being will be is rather frightening and widely debated. The other side of the same coin, however, might bring up the issue of "designer babies." Although *Frankenstein* doesn't engage genetics precisely, the potential of a superior sort of human (or race of humans) is present. The issue gets increasingly murky here. Advocating for genetic advancements and enhancements at every turn *does* open a Pandora's box of dark possibilities and arguing a purely

“transhumanist” point of view *does* seem frightening to our notions of human-ness. Truly, there is something about “being human” worth revering, but the fictional and nonfictional examples of (supra)abled and (ab)normal beings discussed here maintain that human spark steadfastly. Shelley’s “monster” is piquantly pitiable in his exclusion, as are modern athletes aspiring to be the best. Another important point here is that in both of these examples, the deed of creation has already been done. No, we should not push science relentlessly forward without thinking about the consequences, but for now, the “creature” already walks (or runs) among us, with a human brain, a human heart, and prosthetic legs—yet fully human. The problem of how corporeal deviance is handled in our society, or whether we should allow humanity to progress through technology is not hypothetical anymore—if it ever was. We are long past thought experiments. We must write a better “disability” narrative for disabled athletes than what Shelley gives us in *Frankenstein*.

The creature’s resolution is a grim one. Misery and exclusion lead to his death, not to mention a dark and obsessive passion for ruining Victor’s life in the many days preceding it. A melodramatic to project onto these athletes, to be sure—so let’s not. Still, their situation as it stands is not satisfactory nor is it resolved. How do we begin to normalize that which has disrupted our non-disabled norm? How can we accept the future of humanity as a race defined by technology in our present moment, while valuable and impactful lives are here, as cyborgs, being affected by mainstream hegemonies? Difference, by any standard, cannot cause them to be alienated from society. The rejection of disabled athletes is not the same as that of the monster. Though not as direct, not as obvious, and not as violent, barriers still

remain in place, preventing them from navigating the world as others do. This is the problem I am chiefly concerned with. The monster's plight lay in "human senses" that would forever reject him. Something visceral. The disrupted image of man that Dr. Gailey poses is visceral as well, but not in the same way. "Human senses" do not lie at the heart of our rejection of disabled athletes; rather, it seems to be some misplaced sense of purity in physical image that technology disturbs alongside the expression of that purity through Olympic competition. P. David Howe wrote that "ultimately the Paralympics risk becoming a show of technology, rather than a show of athleticism, leaving behind those from the developing world without performance-enhancing technology at their disposal, and those from the West whose bodies are inappropriate for its use." Yet technology is utterly pervasive in competitive sports! From cleats, to uniforms, to methods of tracking an athlete's performance, it cannot be escaped as a means of increasing performance. It seems luddite and elitist of us to draw the defining line around a show of technology at the obvious cyborg, not to mention that such a definition would necessitate a step backwards in the lives of prosthesis users. Instead of implying that the Paralympics should not include cyborg technology, why not propose a universally equitable sporting world? Why not attempt to increase foreign access to blade running technology? Call it pipe dream or naïve idealism if you will, but the alternative implies that the Paralympics (already a show of technology by any estimation) ought to be stripped down to Olympic origins—something like men running across a Greek peninsula. Each of us is already so very cyborg that to push against prosthetic running legs just because they make athletes faster seems ableist.

Consider for a moment that the prosthetics which are rejected from the Olympics for giving an “unfair advantage” truly are especially advantageous to the disabled athlete. Is anyone asking what makes prosthetics advantageous? Are we attempting to design prosthetics that enable disabled athletes to compete against their able-bodied peers? Or are we simply seeing technology, seeing a disabled person achieving a high level of athletic mastery and deducing that something is wrong here; it must not be fair. Since we have not explored the issue with more sophistication, the message comes across as blatant rejection. The disabled athlete is different, therefore they must not be able to compete in the Olympics. The disabled athlete uses prosthetics, therefore they must compete in the Paralympics. Without nuance, the message is ableist, and right now we do not have nuance.

Moving forward, how should a discipline like disability studies respond? Do (supra)able and (ab)normal athletes still occupy this realm? Trying to explicitly place them demonstrates the problem cyborg athletes can face quite well. The need to define bodies based on ability or inability is equally indicative of larger social paradigms that beg reform. Humanity, as science fiction like *Frankenstein* and the very real dilemma of some Paralympians demonstrates, is not ready to welcome the presence of blatant difference, especially if that difference is defined by “unnatural” superiority (or the potential for it). The way forward for disabled athletes will be difficult, to be sure, but the mere fact that our prevailing notions of normality are being disrupted so emphatically is an important step.

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