Glorification and Ableism: Ellen Forney's *Marbles* and the Dangers of "Positive" Stereotypes toward Disability

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Van der Klift and Kunc (1994) propose four social orientations to disability: marginalization, rehabilitation, benevolence, and valuing. However, in my explorations of disability, I have identified an overlooked fifth, *positive* orientation which is increasingly relevant: glorification. Out of these five orientations, only valuing views disability as a normal human characteristic. The first three—marginalization, rehabilitation, and benevolence—attach a negative connotation to disability; even benevolence, a seemingly positive orientation, largely manifests as pity (Hamrie et al., 2006). On the contrary, glorification automatically attaches a positive connotation to disability, forming positive stereotypes. Whilst relatively little literature exists on the positive stereotypes of disability, the glorification orientation leads cartoonist Ellen Forney to struggle with her identity. In other words, her memoir *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me* demonstrates the dangers of seemingly positive stereotypes.

Marbles is as much an exploration of Forney's experiences after her bipolar I disorder diagnosis as it is an exploration of her new identity as an artist with a disability. She initially compares herself to several—as she describes them—*crazy* artists and writers (i.e., historical figures who possibly had a mood disorder, such as Edvard Munch, Virginia Woolf, and Vincent van Gogh). Coupled with her negative perception of the mood stabilizer lithium, she begins to consider her disorder as a key component to creative success: "Good thing [suicidal] depression isn't a problem of mine. Right? Maybe I'll be a genius artist with a superpower, too! Maybe

being bipolar is a gift!" (Forney, 2012, p. 45). This is how she begins to view herself: as a new member of the *crazy artist* club. To be clear, no one else in her life had assigned her this label; rather, it takes shape from her own perception of the crazy artist stereotype and, as I argue here, internalized ableism.

Before moving on, it is first important to establish the dangers of positive—but nevertheless discriminatory—stereotypes. Despite the dearth of discussion within disability studies on this topic, studies of racism and sexism have thoroughly explored it. First and foremost, there is the deindividualization among members of an identity. Siy and Cheryan describe how positive stereotypes of Asian Americans and American women lead to "a sense that one was being depersonalized by the positive stereotype and seen as undifferentiated from fellow group members" (2013, p. 97-98). Positive stereotypes also beget minimization of one's own achievements and traits. If one sees a group as gifted in a certain regard (e.g., athletics), then they may chalk up achievements by members of that group to their supposed innate advantage. One example, as noted in Czopp, Kay, & Cheryan (2015), is the attribution of professional Black athletes' advantages to the imagined natural physiological strength of Black people, which thus dismisses other factors such as training, coaching, and good decision-making. Finally, positive stereotypes and negative stereotypes are often two sides of the same coin, as the former are often coupled with the latter. For example, the view that women are naturally emotionally intelligent and caring is paired with the view that they are best fit as household servants (Czopp et. al, 2015).

The crazy artist stereotype is yet another harmful positive stereotype, and the three dangers above are all present at different points within Forney's memoir. In labeling these past artists and writers with (potential) mood disorders as crazy artists and having initially subscribed to the idea that their disability is essential to their creative ability, she generalizes them all as people who suffered for their craft—people who were only so illustrative under the strife of their mood disorder. Moreover, the label crazy artist itself indicates the corresponding negative stereotype: it generalizes artists and writers with mood disorders as irrational in their thinking, or as individuals meant to suffer. Not only does the generalization hold zero consideration for the kaleidoscope of their experiences and

ideas, but it also sensationalizes their works as sights to gawk at for how they portray the creator's mental illness. At one point, this allure even leads Forney to investigate the paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe, an artist who had a mood disorder: "I studied her paintings for signs of a mental disorder…but I really didn't see evidence of that in her work" (Forney, 2012, p. 142). While it is not unknown for artistic and literary analysis to take into account the life of the creator, glorification reduces the creator's works to mere depictions of their disability.

The crazy artist stereotype is naturally not the only positive stereotype of those with disabilities. As an autistic individual, it would be remiss of me to exclude the disability's positive stereotypes which circulate en masse in digital spaces. Whilst certainly forming prior to the 2020's, it is in this decade that I often come across the stereotype that autistic individuals are always exceptionally smart on a given subject, having an almost esoteric knowledge of their hyperfixation. This has led to the widespread prejudice that individuals who express their interests passionately or in an otherwise eccentric manner are autistic, subsequently leading to comments about how one can "achieve their level of autism" and similar jokes in poor taste. A personally observed exemplar of this phenomenon is content creator Adam Aleksic, who produces videos in which he passionately explains topics pertaining to linguistics. In response to an admittedly comical video in which he transcribes a video game sound effect into the International Phonetic Alphabet, several users commented "Autism at it's [sic] peak" (@young_improver, 2024), "Holy tism" (@donovan_lewis_08, 2024), and other similarly insensitive remarks. These comments are far from exclusive to this video, and he has never mentioned being autistic, only that he has a degree in linguistics from Harvard University. The jokes paint a clear picture: the positive stereotype of autism sends the message that Aleksic's profound knowledge is *due to* autism, just as the positive stereotype of mood disorders initially led Forney to think that these past artists and writers' profound creativity is *due to* (or at least significantly supported by) their disability. In sum, the glorification orientation serves to invalidate the achievements of disabled individuals as mere byproducts of their disability, as opposed to ones obtained through their own skill. In this sense, Forney's memoir serves as a counternarrative: towards the end of the story, she dismantles the

one-dimensional characterizations of artists and writers with mood disorders under the glorification orientation, revealing the reality of disability's complexity.

Forney moves out of her glorification orientation by the end of her journey. After struggling with her first depressive episodes and exploring several methods of treatment (both medicative and not), she moves past the crazy artist stereotype in which she boxed herself: "I'd always been drawn to the 'tortured artist' ideal…but, what a relief to feel like things might be coming together…Finally, after four years…I found balance" (Forney, 2012, p. 195-197). She has not yet recognized her internalized ableism, but she has stopped glorifying her disorder; she no longer feels that she needs to leave her disorder unmedicated to reach her full potential as a crazy artist. Once she reached this comfortable position in her life, she proceeded to conduct her own research on the connections between bipolar disorder and creativity, questioning this positive stereotype's validity. Notwithstanding the correlation she does find between the two, she discovers the varied approaches of historical figures to the relationship between their disability and creativity. Some saw their imagination stifled by lithium and other medication, while others thrived with it (Forney, 2012, p. 215). In other words, every human being leads a complex life in which they make their own decisions about their disability, despite how the glorification model stereotypes them as, in the case of bipolar disorder, emotionally unstable creatives. One could even go beyond that and explain how disabilities vary in their physical, social, and psychological effects on an individual. For instance, autistic people differ in their tic(s) (if even present), hyperfixation(s), ways of communication (e.g., verbal, signing, text-to-speech), and several other characteristics. With all of this in mind, there is no doubt that one cannot paint in broad strokes with disability. It was this conclusion that led Forney to dismantle her preconceived notion of the crazy artist.

Her journey finally concludes with her transition to the valuing orientation. To reiterate, the valuing orientation regards disability as a fact of life. As disability rights activist James Charlton describes it, "Having a disability is essentially neither a good thing nor a bad thing. It just is" (1998, p. 167). Forney holds the same outlook in her conclusion: regardless of whether bipolar disorder is good or bad, it is a part of who she is as a person (2012, p. 225-226).

Her disability is a characteristic, and her approach to it is no longer dictated by external ableist social orientations; rather, it is one dictated by self-acceptance (Forney, 2012, p. 237).

The glorification orientation, as with the marginalization, rehabilitation, and benevolence models, magnifies an individual's disability and, from there, develops a one-dimensional perception of them. While glorification may ascribe positive traits to individuals—such as intelligence, creativity, or physical strength—those traits will apply to everyone of their disability and will never take their individual personality, achievements, talents, and struggles into meaningful consideration. These positive traits are also often paired with negative traits, as this orientation does not recognize the individual, but rather their disability. Disabled folk can internalize this orientation, as Ellen Forney did, leading to inner turmoil and an identity crisis. For that reason, it is important for teachers to honor the individuality of their students. Even if a child with a mood disorder excels at drawing, or an autistic child excels in science, we must carefully examine our beliefs and question, "Are we viewing this child as a 'troubled prodigy,' or are we viewing this child as someone who has a disability and enjoys drawing or science?" Once teachers adopt the latter prospect, they can develop a holistic image of the child, one that values each of their unique characteristics rather than glorifying a singular one. My recommendation is thus: if teachers can model an unconditional respect for disability, then children will unconditionally respect themselves; they will realize they are okay simply being who they are, rather than confining themselves to any—as Ellen Forney would describe it—crazy artist box.

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