

McRuer, R., & Mollow, A. (Eds.) *Sex and Disability*.
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Building on Anne Finger's 1992 observation that sexuality is one of the sources of disabled people's deep oppression and pain, and further that in addition to disability rights it is sexuality that highlights the need for cultural change in our ableist society, Anna Mollow and Robert McRuer's edited volume *Sex and Disability* (2012) questions the cultural conceptions of disability and sex. While this book is not intended to be a practical intervention into facilitating access to sex for disabled people, *Sex and Disability* is, rather, a diverse collection of essays that re-conceptualizes sex and disability, and the ways in which each concept can be undressed when put in relation to one another. Such a relational undressing of sex and disability in this collection has important implications for changing ableist culture.

This book contributes to disability studies by emphasizing the fluid and contestable nature of the terms disability and sex. The book asks us to re-think and re-situate our assumed understanding of, and hold on, libidinal investments, the circulation of erotic connections, and their relationship to constructions of disability or disabled identities. One such connection that the editors and authors make in querying what is productive in putting sex and disability together is in contesting what are considered the proper, permissible and punishable forms of disabled sex—forms that often contradict one another. When put in tension with one another, these contradictions lead not to synthesis, but rather to a constellation of approaches to disability and sex that leave neither concept unchanged. The book also looks at the failure of sex and disability to work together, to expose violence and exclusion and the ways in which disability can violate

norms of respectability. The editors argue that the collection “has the potential to transform sex...and confuse disability as it is understood in the dominant culture, in disability studies, and in the disability rights movement” (32). Their hope is that the collection leaves the reader wanting and demanding more from the tropes of disability and sex that are readily available within neoliberal, capitalist culture.

One prompt to push the reader to want more is by way of Tobin Siebers’s essay “A Sexual Culture for Disabled People.” In this essay, Siebers asks how the ideology of ability determines how we think about sex (40). In doing so, he links sex to conceptions of humanness, the production of worthy offspring, and eugenic conceptions of the future, which predominately do not include disability. He argues that thinking disability and sexuality together can alter conceptions of linear temporality and how the body is eroticized, and create new geographies of sex (47-51).

David Serlin, in his piece “Touching Stories,” also alters the ways in which disability and sexuality are conceptualized through framing touch as a productive “psychic, experiential and epistemological category through which subjective understandings of one’s body and one’s self in the world are represented, refracted, and made flesh” (162). For Serlin, touch is both a form of communication and system of meaning making that “engages with the erotic potential that inheres in the experience of disability” (146).

Serlin’s troubling of touch as a system of meaning making is further complicated when put into constellation with Markotic and McRuer’s critique of crip nationalism. In “Leading with Your Head,” these authors take up the 2005 documentary *Murderball*. In this film, bodies are constantly in contact with one another, whether while playing quad rugby or while being manipulated during rehabilitation sessions. Contrasting lines from the film such as “The first thing I learned how to do

was jerk off” and “We’re not going for a hug; we’re going for a gold medal” (170), Markotic and McRuer explore how it is precisely through curating the film as speaking against the sexually limited role the quad rugby players can have within “the confines of patriarchy and nationalized masculinity,” that this film is unable to explore its connections to transnational queerness, disability, and labour (180). In ignoring connections to transnational queerness, disability, and labour, the film participates in a form of crip nationalism that benefits neoliberal capitalism.

In questioning the ideology of ability, Siebers calls for an accessible sexual citizenship that would include accessing information about sexuality, freedom of association in institutions and care facilities, demedicalizing disabled sexuality, addressing sexual needs and desires as part of health care, re-professionalizing caregivers to recognize, not deny, sexuality, and privacy on demand (47). Such accessible sexual citizenship could augment what Russell Shuttleworth notes in his contribution “Bridging Theory and Experience” as the forms by which disabled sex can transform sexuality through the creative communication that many disabled people employ (65).

The issues expressed in the idea of accessible sexual citizenship also come into play in Michel Desjardins’s piece “The Sexualized Body of the Child,” which explores how adolescents and young adults labelled intellectually disabled are permitted to express their sexuality. Desjardins’s article charts the ways in which an “adapted sexuality” (78) exists for those labelled intellectually disabled, and this sexuality is subjected to “a series of extraordinary rules, controls, and prohibitions.” Such controls include sterilization as a way to grant access to sexual intercourse while ensuring procreation does not occur (79). This form of sterilized sexuality is considered by parents to be “the lesser of two evils” (79). As involuntary sterilization is illegal, the parents must use various methods to convince their child to choose sterilization. However, as with Siebers’s accessible sexual citizenship, the relationship of choice is only made possible through neoliberal

self-governing scripts that are themselves readily available by way of the inculcation of market rationalities that seep into our everyday lives and self-understandings. In this way, accessible sexual citizenship and choosing sterilization, while offering liberating potentials, can also be read as a part of a dangerous logic of neoliberalism.

In her compelling contribution “Dismembering the Lynch Mob,” Michelle Jarman reads race, disability and masculinity together as “dynamic social and discursive processes that inform each other” (91), specifically exploring the relationship between radicalized lynching and eugenic sterilization. Jarman argues that while racist violence and surgical sterilization have distinct histories, “the ubiquitous presence of lynching in the public imagination during the period from 1980 to 1940 may have informed and helped naturalize the rationale used to support medical castration and asexualization” (92). Furthermore, the pervasive eugenic narratives of “uncontrollable sexual deviance” among those deemed “feebleminded” resulted in the cultural conflation of sexual deviance with “the highly radicalized category of cognitive inferiority” (92). Importantly, Jarman shows how, through forms of sexual deviation, racism, and ableism work together in eugenic practices and further how “the discourse of race was intensified by the grown intolerance toward disability during this era” (93).

In “Desire and Disgust,” Alison Kafer thoughtfully complicates notions of sexuality, disability, and desire. Kafer reflects on what it means to experience her amputated legs as a site of desire while at the same time experiencing her body through ableism, pathology, and shame (345). Kafer astutely asks: “How can we eroticize extraordinary bodies without fetishizing impairment, without reducing human beings to spare parts and effacing the lived experiences of disability?” (348). This question stretches larger than considering disability and sexuality and indeed connects to Jarman’s essay in acknowledging that disability is not a master status (nor master oppression),

but neither is disability reducible to a “spare part” or a trivial thing that can be overcome. Precisely because disability is bound up with race, class, gender, colonialism, patriarchy, etc. in complicated ways means that desire and sexuality, both inherently connected to disability, are equally complicated. Thinking disability and sex, or disability and desire, is to queer how we come to know ourselves as in/human, and what the histories and experiences of coming to know our in/humanness tell us of our sexualities and desires.

This book has been criticized by another reviewer for its lack of practical insight for oppressed disabled people. Tom Shakespeare (2012) charges that the collection is overly academic, that the contributions in this book are light on statistics, that there is little advice on how to overcome a lack of access to sex, and finally, he questions what queer theory has to do with sex and disability. However, it is precisely because this book is not a sex-manual that it is a much needed addition to disability studies. By troubling the concept of what sex is, this collection contests the notion that sex is something that some people have and some people do not, and further troubles that sex is something that can be known and solved through stats and practical logistics. Instead, this collection works to show both the oppressive and liberating ways in which sex and disability circulate, at once contradictory and co-constituting. Disability is not outside of sexual economies but is, as in the case of crip nationalisms, a key constituting factor in marking neoliberal success. The editors point to the ways in which sex and disability are not in opposition to one another, despite the fact that culture continues to try to dichotomize the concepts. Rather, the authors of this collection point to the ways in which disability and sex unravel one another, but are never fully untwined. This book shows sex to be at work in encounters and objects not usually considered to be erotic, and marks the terrifying and exhilarating ways in which disability turns up

in unexpected places. Such an undressing of sex and disability as is provided in this collection is sure to have a significant impact on disability studies in the years to come.

References

Shakespeare, T. (2012). "Review of sex and disability." *Disability & Society*, 27(6), 894-895.