Challenging Discourses of Disabled Sexual Deviance: An Historic Overview and Critical Analysis

- AND -

Toward Disabled Perspectives of Sexual Expression: A Multi-Media Analysis

by
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Abstract

Essay 1: “Challenging Discourses of Disabled Sexual Deviance: An Historic Overview and Critical Analysis” seeks to establish how the discourse of disabled sexual deviance has been maintained through the historical oppression of people with disability. It analyses how disabled sexual deviance is upheld by rampant sexual exclusion and compromised sexual citizenship.

Keywords: disability studies; disability and sexuality; disabled sexual deviance

Essay 2: “Toward Disabled Perspectives of Sexual Expression: A Multi-Media Analysis” evaluates the representations of sexuality and disability in dramatic, documentary, and science-fiction film, and in live performance. It pays particularly close attention to the ways in which deviant representations of disabled sexual expression can begin to be deconstructed by adopting perspectives of disabled sexual diversity and inexactness within them.

Keywords: disability studies; disability and sexuality; films on sex and disability, representation
Dedication

For Kelsey.

Thank you for always seeing my strength and beauty and for believing in me the most.

Without you I wouldn’t have wings to fly.
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1: Challenging Discourses of Disabled Sexual Deviance: An Historic Overview and Critical Analysis

Introduction

In order to begin to understand why disabled sexual expression continues to considered as taboo in the present, by looking historically at both the oppression of atypical or “disabled” bodies and the evolution of understandings of sexuality we can start to see how the sexual expression of people with disabilities is impeded upon from multiple directions, compromising its normalcy and existence.

The marginalization of atypical bodies dates back centuries and I have chosen to investigate the ways in which the disabled were oppressed in the contexts of antiquity, carnivals, freaks, Nazi Germany, and in present day body ideals to illustrate the pervasiveness of their marginality.

Additionally, the disabled experience rampant sexual exclusion whereby social and physical access to their sexual expression is severely limited. Their sexual autonomy is often left in the hands of others, such as personal care attendants and sex workers, leaving them with little independence and privacy. More importantly, narrow definitions of sexuality largely exclude those with bodily differences, threatening their sexual legitimacy in the eyes of others and their access to sexual health services.

Beyond sexual exclusion, sex has long been understood as a determinate of truth and correctness (Foucault 1978), where those that differ from the rigidity of these “truths” are considered invalid and inappropriate. Contestations surrounding the “truth” of sex from Disability Studies scholars are useful to highlight how the rigidity in understandings of sexuality are compromising for the disabled.

In addition to truth, sex is also determined through normativity and regulation. Norms influence all aspects of sexual expression and impact which bodies are deemed to be acceptable. Norms also regulate the sexual practices that people are permitted to engage in. For example, while lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults have higher rates of disability than their heterosexual counterparts (Fredriksen-Goldsen, Kim, & Barkan,
heterosexual normativity perpetuates that their perspectives are less valuable, relegating their voices to the periphery.

The polarity that exists between sex and disability reinforces how they are routinely viewed as oppositional spheres. By redefining both sex and disability to be more malleable can illuminate valuable intersections between the two that are worthy of analysis.

A possible way to begin to deconstruct stagnant representations of disabled sexual expression is through the promotion of sexual inclusion and sexual citizenship. While sexual inclusion seeks to include people with disabilities into normative paradigms of sexuality, the way in which it determines that agency is the means to achieve sexual inclusion, when the sexual agency of people with disabilities is often compromised is exceedingly problematic. Alternatively, sexual citizenship takes a more robust approach and provides people with disabilities with multiple avenues in which to assert their sexual autonomy, catered to their individual needs.

The way in which people with disabilities have been oppressed historically, sexually excluded, have their bodies managed through sexual norms and means of regulation, are impeded upon by perceived truths of their sexual deviance, and are confined by the polarity of understandings of sex and disability, creates a vicious, multi-layered cycle of sexual marginalization that is difficult to alleviate. A potential way to combat this pattern of disabled sexual oppression is through harnessing the disability theories of sexual inclusion and citizenship to put disabled perspectives at the heart of their drive for sexual liberation.

The research question that this paper seeks to address is how the discourse of disabled sexual deviance has been upheld historically through the oppression of atypical or “disabled” bodies and theoretically in understandings of sexuality and disability.
Historical Analysis

This section seeks to outline how atypical bodies have been marginalized throughout history in order to demonstrate that the discourse of disabled sexual deviance is an extension of the historical legacy of ‘disabled’ oppression. In order to do so, I will explore how the atypical body has been marginalized in the five different contexts of antiquity, carnivals, freaks, Nazi Germany, and in present day body ideals. I will then discuss the drive for disabled sexual inclusion and offer a possible way forward.

Antiquity

The classical conceptualizations of the body within Greco-Roman antiquity completely excluded atypical bodies, where otherness was entirely unacceptable. The ableism within the idealized bodies of antiquity are evident in the way that “For Plato, there was a clear connection between virtue and ‘a body held upright’ with ‘limbs running in a straight line,’ with sinews ‘finely taut.’ Plato goes on to contrast this ‘virtuous physique’ with ‘all beggarly stooping and limp cowardice’” (Gruneau, 2017, p. 23). “Stooping and limp” bodies such as those of the disabled that could not stand up against the idealized form were not only rendered atypical, but more problematically and to their detriment they were regarded as lacking virtue altogether. Additionally, according to Stallybrass & White, “‘In the classical discursive body were enclosed those regulative systems which were closed, homogeneous, monumental, centered and symmetrical’” (Stallybrass & White, as cited in Gruneau, 2017, p. 91). The asymmetrical and “stooping” nature of the atypical body push it beyond the realm of regulation, where its deviantization grows unrestrained due to its lack of virtue. Exceedingly, the “representations of male nudity took on a highly idealized form, inspired by athleticism, the craft of armory, and the imposition of geometric symmetry on the male torso to transfigure the body in a dramatic and heroic way” (p. 22). For men in particular, lacking
the athletic and heroic body of the day meant lacking their manhood altogether, making them effeminate. Atypical bodies, given their perceived unrighteousness, were routinely shunned from both everyday society and culture.

Due to the way that “Outward appearance was linked to the state of the soul...For the beholder, the outward appearance must evoke the ideal type. Beauty, the highest concept of which man is capable, would in this manner transmit itself to other men” (Mosse, 1975, p. 26). Having an incapable body meant to lack both righteousness and beauty, the ultimate human aspiration. Physical difference being equated with impurity still holds true today and it had grave consequences in the Nazi period. It was believed that the “further a race departed from [the ideal form], the lower it must rank on the scale of humanity” (pp. 27–28). Subsequently, “eugenics is closely associated with the crucial symbolism of Greek and noble beauty” (p. 28). By determining the scale of humanity by beauty meant that anyone who deviated from the idealized norm, whether by race or ability, could be “justifiably” expunged. For the Nazis, “The “people” were not considered merely as a gathering of individuals, but exemplified an idea of the beauty of soul which was projected upon the outward world” (p. 45). Beauty, during Nazi reign, was seen as the utmost testament of purity and strength, where anything less than the ideal was seen as a threat to German prowess.

Carnivals

While the atypical were pushed to the periphery of society in antiquity, those with deviant bodies were embraced within carnivals and freak shows of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. For Mikhail Bakhtin, carnivals “provided an imaginative repertoire for the collective rehearsal of the grotesque and profane aspects of pre-modern folk cultures in Europe” (Gruneau, 2017, p. 67). Carnivals were highly performative spaces that marketed the unusual; where grotesque others like those with atypical bodies were put on display. He interpreted carnivals as being “both aesthetically
and politically transgressive by representing the human body “as multiple, bulging, over-or under-sized, protuberant and incomplete. The openings and orifices of this carnival body are emphasized” (p. 67). The carnival understood the body as being widely malleable which provided a place for atypical bodies to occupy and fit into. The atypical or imperfect was used within the carnival to mock the upper classes. While the atypical in theory may have fit in, the way in which “a classical “virtuous” bodily aesthetic…provided a basis for criticizing the plebeian, carnival body as profane, undisciplined, and undesirable” (p. 91) invited the routine deviantization of their bodies, inherently setting them apart.

Additionally, “Bakhtin reads the profane, grotesque and often violent traditions of medieval and Renaissance folk cultures as the manifestation of an age-old collective tradition that has always provided a potential source of social opposition to official cultures” (p. 67). Although the carnival culture that abnormal bodies fit into acted as a space of potential social and cultural opposition, a position in which disabled bodies continue to inhabit and speak from today, the way disability tends to remain in perpetual opposition, being always on the periphery, also enshrines its deviance. Due to the way “the carnival traditions associated with medieval fairs and religious festivals were events that the powerful allowed to occur [they] were therefore tightly framed by the broader social logic of domination” (p. 67). While the carnival provided a place of opposition it was temporary, existing only within its “state of exception”, being somewhere they were permitted to occupy, where their inclusion was not of their own making or control.

**Freaks in Culture**

Moving beyond the medieval carnival, Nadja Durbach (2009) observes: “In the period between 1847 and 1914—the heyday of the modern freak show—it quickly became the most common way to refer to the hundreds of individuals across the United Kingdom who exhibited a congenital bodily anomaly for profit” (p. 1). More important
than profiting from their differences, which I will return to when I discuss the economics of freak shows, “displays of freakery were critical sites for popular and professional debates about the meanings attached to bodily difference” (p. 1). Thus, freak shows had a vital cultural and societal influence. In an historical analysis of atypical or disabled bodies such as this one it is “crucial to understand the specific context that produced certain types of bodies as aberrant and the ways in which their display operated as both an index of, and a strategy to cope with, larger cultural anxieties” (p. 3). At the height of the freak show, “displays of “human oddities” functioned as important spaces for negotiations over the class, gender, racial, ethnic, and sexual meanings of “normal” and “abnormal” bodies” (p. 17). While fairs and freak shows were sites of exception where the usual rules and expectations of society did not apply, they indeed influenced how normal and abnormal were demarcated in the outside world in a wide range of social spheres.

Due to the way “meanings invested in monstrous bodies are culturally contingent…the significance attached to anomalous bodies, and thus the lessons they embodied, were never stable” (p. 3). The instability of bodily significance attributed to the freak overflowed into the realm of normalcy, which started to dissolve the boundary between normal and abnormal. Consequently, freak shows were particularly significant given that they “invited multiple interpretations, not limited to the medical, of the significance of physical difference and thus opened up public debate about the ramifications of where the boundary between the self and the other could be, and should be, drawn” (p. 28).

While “Judith Halberstam maintains that “the monster functions as monster . . . when it is able to condense as many fear-producing traits as possible into one body”” (p. 3) belonging to the Other, the freak’s “ability to inhabit two categories at once, and thus to challenge the distinction between them, was the hallmark of the nineteenth and early
twentieth-century freak show performer” (pp. 3–4). By blurring the binary distinction between normal and abnormal gave the freakish monster a heightened resemblance of human typicality, significantly reducing their degree of separation from the rest of society.

Additionally, Durbach argues that “it was precisely this corporeal and cultural volatility—this refusal to uphold the natural order, that in turn sanctioned the social order—that made the freak so socially and politically disruptive and thus so frightening” (p. 4). The bodily unpredictability of the freak and its resistance to be contained was seen as a disruption to be feared, magnifying its deviantization. The freak show offered a “contested space in which showmen, spectators, scientists, and freak performers themselves used the “comic horror of monsters” to negotiate around what it meant to be “normal”” (p. 4). Being a freak afforded the atypical with a degree of power by allowing them to play a role in negotiating the meanings of normal in a variety of social spheres like race and ability, among many others.

Historically, “laughing at those with physical deformities…was in the eighteenth century part of an “ideology of form” that dismissed the deformed as “foreign, transgressive, ugly and inherently worthy of contempt”” (p. 4). Freak shows offered some deviation from the upright ideal body by showcasing a “contested space in which showmen, spectators, scientists, and freak performers themselves used the “comic horror of monsters” to negotiate around what it meant to be “normal”” (p. 4). Due to the widening of the confines of normalcy, “In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries freaks could thus be found not only in established entertainment venues, but also behind almost any door...[where they used the] desire for the spectacular and the curious” (p. 5) to their social advantage. The social gains of the freak show occurred through the performativity of ones atypicality via freakery:
It was the “techniques of exhibition in which corporeal difference is literally staged”—techniques that included costumes, choreography, and supporting materials such as souvenir photographs and pamphlets—that in the end constructed the anomalous body as freakish. For, as Thomson has argued, the freak was “fabricated from the raw material of bodily variations” for entirely social purposes; the “freak of nature,” she insists, was always in fact a “freak of culture”. (p. 9)

Bodily difference was smartly sold and profited from through the social and cultural construction of the freak and its corresponding freak show. Freak shows and the immense degree of performativity that went into them were highly spectacularized social affairs, which stood to challenge notions of bodily normalcy. The image of the freak, and all spectacularized images, are socially and societally impactful due to the way “images in their turn assume material form and exert a real influence on society: this is why Debord insists that "ideological entities have never been mere fictions" (SS 212)” (Jappe, 1999, p. 19). A major strength of ideological images in Guy Debord’s Society of the Spectacle is their translatability into materiality. Consequently, “everywhere we find reality replaced by images. In the process, images end up by becoming real, and reality ends up transformed into images…[which also] affect the real social activity of those who merely contemplate these images” (p. 7). The power of ideology lies in its blurring of the distinction between reality standing in for image and vice versa, where reality and image become indistinguishable from one another. While the atypical actively participated in their construction as freaks, the way they crept into the realm of normalcy within society and culture can be attributed to the way the people read their image as being real, influencing how they were interpreted by all who encountered them.

Freaks in Economics
In addition to the freak’s influence at the level of the image, Debord’s ““integration of State and economy”” (p. 7) within the spectacle makes an economic discussion of the freak show imperative. The success and global reach of the freak show was enhanced by projects of modernity, such as colonialism and traditional exploration. According to Durbach “By the mid-nineteenth century the freak show had become a truly international institution. Human oddities from around the world, and increasingly from the colonized areas with which Europeans had the most regular contact, crisscrossed the Atlantic” (Durbach, 2009, p. 3). Subsequently, “The diversity of human anomalies on display increased over the course of the nineteenth century, in part because of developments in transportation” (p. 2). Colonization expanded the “human oddities” that were cultivated for display and the ways in which they could now be performed for profit on a truly global scale.

While the concept of the freak show is frequently read as being exploitative, the atypical bodies that participated within them benefited from a degree of financial stability and acceptance as contributing members of society. According to Richard Gruneau, “Like all emerging institutions of modernity, the ultimate aim of the process is for individuals to become responsible for their own normalization and to develop new understandings of their identities that enhance the ‘health’ of the social body” (Gruneau, 2017, p. 86). Freak shows acted as a truly modern project by giving the atypical a way to take responsibility for their normalization by providing them with active ways to begin to attain it, for their own sake and for the benefit of society as a whole. Working as a freak paid dividends due to the way it was a “fairly lucrative business, [where] the work [was] much easier and better paid than other types of relatively unskilled labor” (Durbach, 2009, p. 12). The atypical made great financial gains by joining freak shows and members were highly sought after for the revenues they could generate. Ultimately, freaks, “though subject to the vagaries of the economy, were, like other types of
performers, active agents in the marketplace for commercialized leisure” (p. 13). Freaks were “active agents” within the economy by moving beyond passive participation to regularly negotiate the terms and conditions of their work. Freak shows gave the atypical a space in which to exert their rights, which they likely would not have as readily had otherwise. Evidently, freak shows provided their members with a degree of independence (p. 14) which gave them significant social and economic gains.

Additionally, freak shows diminished how the atypical were regarded as burdens on society by reinforcing how “the distinction between ‘able-bodied’ and not was rooted not in the deformity of the body per se but rather in understandings of its capacity for labor” (p. 18). Freak shows promoted the expansion of the “capacity for labor” beyond the able upright body by giving the atypical a space within the labor force. Through their work within the freak show they “demonstrated their respectable status as self-sufficient laborers and resisted the idea that they were dependents suffering from what the poor law termed “infirmity of the body”” (p. 19). Freak shows gave the atypical a way to become “self-sufficient”, where they could essentially overcome their deficiencies. While the freak show began to push the atypical into the realm of normalcy on a cultural level, on an economic level they achieved a status of typicality. Due to the opportunity to overcome their abnormality “freaks of all varieties tended to construct themselves as skilled performers whose bodies allowed them to lead normal, if not extraordinary, lives, a fact that was clearly central to their public personae” (p. 20). While freaks achieved a level of economic normalcy, on an ideological level, however, they moved into a seemingly ‘beyond normal’ state of being. By embracing their extraordinary qualities to overcome their impairments or “disabilities” the atypical became the original “supercrips” (Smith, 2015, p. 391). As a result they fervently rejected being labeled abnormal or “disabled”.

**Freaks in Science**

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While freaks maintained a level of cultural and economic normalcy, on a scientific level they largely remained in the realm of the abnormal. The science of the time relied on colonial understandings of bodily inferiority. As such, “Displays of bodily difference were thus part of the discourse of imperial superiority that rested on seemingly scientific studies of race” (Durbach, 2009, p. 30). The way in which “racial difference was produced in dynamic relationship to other forms of corporeal ‘deviance’ and cannot be divorced from the discourses of deformity more generally” (p. 32), racial difference and physical abnormality were intricately intertwined as emblems of bodily deviance. Due to the inseparability between race and ability “‘primitive’ or ‘savage’ Others were central players in nineteenth-century freak shows, [where] their racial and cultural differences [were] cast as a bodily anomaly analogous to physical deformation” (p. 8). Physical abnormality being equated with racial difference meant that atypical bodies of color were multiply marginalized and subjected to additional bodily policing and regulation. While they could theoretically overcome their impairments financially, the markings of otherness were difficult to navigate around. Freak shows ultimately were “spectacle[s] of binary division” (Gruneau, 2017, p. 115) where difference was magnified. Due to the way “The science—or, perhaps more accurately, the pseudoscience—of the betterment of a race through selective breeding practices, eugenics explicitly sought to encourage the reproduction of the fittest members of society and thus to eliminate freaks” (Durbach, 2009, p. 21). In spite of their sense of cultural and scientific normalcy, within eugenics the physically unfit were selected for elimination and prevented from reproducing for the betterment of society. It thus became critical to “establish that they were not exhibiting a diseased or unhealthy body” (p. 26) and they “continued to rely heavily on their display as wonders, a commercial and cultural practice that…dates back at least as far as the sixteenth century” (p. 23). While freaks seemingly relied on the age-old practice of spectacularizing their differences in an attempt to cast off being read as diseased and
impure, the science of the time ultimately continued to promote their eradication. The spectacularization of their otherness arguably heightened their deviance, fueling the desire to eliminate them. Due to the way they continually promoted “freakish bodily difference” they “thus normalized the white British body” (p. 30) against their own. They reinforced how the idealized body ideal was something that they could never fully acquire, where their abnormal bodies could never contribute to society as much as normal ones could.

**Nazi Germany**

Antique notions of the upright and pure body, in addition to the desire to eliminate freaks combined to contribute to the grave consequences the atypical experienced during the Nazi eugenic campaign. The discussion of eugenics here is not meant to be exhaustive, but of course recognizes the broad and complex historical, socio-cultural and political dimensions of eugenics philosophy and social movements in the broadest range of contexts. The focus in this discussion is on the practice of eugenics in Nazi Germany because this case provides a most salient and compelling example of how disabled people perished under eugenic movement’s aim of eliminating so-called "degeneracy".

The Nazi’s destruction on the disabled can be summarized as follows. In 1934 the Third Reich enacted the Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring, which led to the forced sterilization of more than 250,000 people “diagnosed with alcoholism, manic-depression, schizophrenia, hereditary epilepsy, blindness and deafness, congenital mental deficiency, hereditary disease and physical deformity.”

(Gruneau, 2017, p. 143)

The Nazi’s forced sterilization of hundreds of thousands of individuals with such a wide range of genetic deficiencies exemplifies the way in which eugenics systematically
sought to eradicate bodily abnormality on a mass scale. Additionally, in Nazi Austria the “Hereditary Health Court decreed a total of 1515 sterilization cases” (Czech, 2018, p. 19). If the diseased were allowed to reproduce it was believed that society would be rendered impure and ultimately weak.

The Nazi’s would take a darker step beyond sterilization in their desire to eliminate diseased bodies when

Am Spiegelgrund was founded in July 1940 on the premises of Vienna’s Steinhof psychiatric hospital, after approximately 3200 patients had already been sent to the T4 killing facility in Hartheim [80]. The new facility was... a collecting point for children who did not conform to the regime’s criteria of “hereditary worthiness” and “racial purity.” From 1940 to 1945, nearly 800 children perished at the institution; many of them murdered by poisoning and other methods. (p. 20)

The T4 killing program ensured that the impurity of the disabled would not continue to multiply and damage the makeup of the people. This sentiment was echoed by Hans Asperger, one of the fathers of autism research, a paediatrician who colluded with the Nazis. Asperger argued that “We must ensure that the diseased who would transmit their diseases to remote generations, to the detriment of the individual and of the Volk, are stopped from transmitting their diseased hereditary material” (Asperger, as cited in Czech, 2018, p. 14). People with diseases were exterminated to prevent their “damaged” genetic makeup from spreading, which was feared to compromise the beauty and strength of the people, the Volk. While “These mass killings of mental patients during Nazi regime… (were) sponsored, planned, and organized by leading psychiatrists and pediatricians of the universities (Berlin, Heidelberg and others) in psychiatric hospitals (1982:10-11)” (Charny, as cited in Blaser, 2001, p. 29), people continue to believe that Asperger protected the diseased from their demise. Evidently, “it seems that Asperger was a well-functioning cog in a deadly machine…[and] the authorities trusted Asperger
to lend his expertise to the selection of children for elimination” (Czech, 2018, p. 25). While he indeed had the choice, “Asperger did not refrain from diagnoses such as “feeble-mindedness,” which could entail serious dangers in the context of a youth welfare system dominated by an eliminatory ideology towards the weakest members of society” (p. 27). The promotion of a strong and healthy Volk was rife with contradictions, especially for those deemed genetically inferior. “Due to increasing labor shortages, it became a political and military imperative to rehabilitate as many potential workers as possible, even those considered of inferior hereditary quality” (p. 15). As with the nineteenth century freak shows, if the disabled could actively contribute to the functioning of society there was reason enough to keep them. Additionally, “The complex and sometimes contradictory attitude towards children with disabilities or other challenges is underlined by the fact that the Hitler Youth had special formations for the blind and the deaf” (p. 16), giving them a place within the thriving youth movement.

Under the Nazi regime the sexuality of the diseased was reduced to their ability to reproduce and the fears surrounding the spread of their impure genetic makeup. However, the concept of “degenerative stigmas”—small bodily anomalies, which were supposed to indicate the “degenerative constitution” of some of his patients” (p. 29) were used as justification for the other types of sexual trauma inflicted on the disabled. It has been documented that “At Biedermannsdorf, as in similar institutions, children were routinely subjected to emotional, physical, and sexual violence from their peers and from staff” (p. 27). Asperger believed that “victims of sexual abuse shared a common constitutional disposition and certain character traits such as “shamelessness,” leading them to “attract” such experiences, while children with “natural defensive forces” should be able to “reject” them” (p. 29). While the Nazis were so afraid of the spread of diseased genetic material they ironically were quick to justify the routine sexual harm they inflicted on atypical individuals. The Nazi doctors regarded sexual promiscuity and
abuse as ““sexual depravity”” (p. 29), that needed remedying through sterilization or euthanasia. The way the Nazis compromised disabled sexuality while abusively engaging with it has significant similarities to the way in which today, while the disabled are frequently read as asexual they experience some of the highest rates of sexual assault, where “women with a disability [are] nearly twice as likely as women without a disability to have been sexually assaulted” (Statistics Canada, 2018).

The tactics used to exterminate the disabled were especially pertinent given how they acted as a precursor to the mass killings of Jews and other groups of people deemed impure. The forced sterilization under the Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring was

“the first step in a complex and systematic eugenic campaign . . . culminating in the extermination of Jews, homosexuals, gypsies, political dissidents and others classified as physiologically or psychologically ‘degenerate’”. (Brauer, as cited in Gruneau, 2017, p. 143)

The process and ease of eliminating degeneracy was easily extendable to a host of other bodily impurities deemed necessary of erasure. Specifically, “The mass murder techniques deployed in the euthanasia hospitals were later utilized against Jews (1997: 208)” (Gallagher, as cited in Blaser, 2001, p. 30). Blaser posits that by extending “Euthanasia beyond the ‘congenitally infirm and insane’ as well as the widespread appeals to the elimination of ‘parasites’ makes the fate of PWDs during the Holocaust a central matter rather than a side issue” (Blaser, 2001, p. 31). Physical impurity played a fundamental role in “racial science” because its eradication acted as a test to determine that other groups could also be expunged without any major obstacles restraining its destruction. Due to their marginality the disabled are often the first targets within atrocities such as genocide. Blaser cites “Jack Nusan Porter[s]…three characteristics of the victim in depicting ‘components of genocide’: Isolated, Powerless, and Vulnerable
All three characteristics tend to describe PWDs” (p. 25), making them likely targets. According to Blaser, the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines genocide as the

“intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethical, racial or religious group”

[are] far too limited…[due to the way they do] not include the targeting of identifiable social and political groups (for instance people with Western contacts or people with disabilities). (p. 26)

It appears that even within understandings of genocide itself people with disabilities remain as unprotected targets due to the way the crime of genocide does not include the destruction of disabled groups. Their exclusion from the definition denies them their status as victims of genocide, where the absence of an acknowledgment of their suffering adds to their trauma. The absence of disability within definitions of genocide and definitions of sexuality, which I will turn to shortly, reinforces how disabled bodies continue to be regarded as being worth less than others.

Regardless of disabled exclusion in definitions of genocide, the Nazi genocide immensely affected people with disabilities. In Nazi Germany three out of ten of Blaser’s propositions about PWDs and genocide were strongly supported:

P1. PWDs may be selected as direct targets by a genocidal regime…
P3. Genocidal movements or regimes’ perspectives on medicine may have disproportionate effects on PWDs…
P9. The “survivor syndrome” which is a result of genocide reflects the continuing relevance of disability. (pp. 27–28)

While my disability analysis of Nazi Germany strongly supports propositions 1 and 3, proposition 9 is also very relevant. Many survivors of the Holocaust experienced ‘survivor syndrome,’ symptoms of which include “acute anxiety, cognitive and memory disorders, depression, withdrawal, and hypochondria (1997: 144)” (Niewyl, as cited in
Blaser, 2001, p. 31). These symptoms are arguably all characteristics of disability. While the erasure of disabled people led to the onslaught of casualties in the name of purity under the Nazis, disability ironically remained as one of the regime’s lasting legacies. While the title of Blaser’s (2001) chapter posits that the disabled are “Always the First to Go,” they are also often the last to remain, the fact of which visibly highlights the contradictions of disability within the Nazi regime.

**Present day body ideals**

The body ideals of the present attributed to healthy sexual subjects maintain ancient and fascist notions of the ideal body, which exclude atypical bodies belonging to the disabled. According to De Boer (2014) “social attitudes around body image and cultural ideals of attractiveness may hinder the sexual expression of disabled people” (p. 66). In the present, attractiveness is largely determined by hyper able-bodiedness, similar to being upright and pure in antiquity and the Nazi regimes, respectively. The further one deviates from hyper ability the more their opportunities for sexual expression are compromised. “Insofar as ‘real men’ are defined in a way that depends on physical strength, independence, and assertiveness (among other similar qualities), disabled men are not ‘real men’” (p. 76) due to their physical and social inferiority, making them unworthy of sexual expression. Since sexual expression is believed to be reserved for the able-bodied, a bodily state which the disabled rarely achieve, the “social attitudes toward disabled people perpetuate sexual exclusion” (p. 77). Due to the way “some individuals living with a disability are taught that their sexuality is not equivalent to those living without a disability” highlights “an overt social resistance to their sexuality” (Esmail, Darry, Walter, & Knupp, 2010, p. 1151). An overt resistance to the sexuality of the disabled is nothing new, which the history of forcibly sterilizing those with intellectual disability in the Nazi regime and beyond demonstrates. The overt resistance to the sexuality of the disabled culminates in there being next to “no exposure to sexuality and
disability in sexual education classes, media or social conversations. The topic of sexuality for individuals living with a disability is never broached, and therefore assumed to be non-existent for the rest of society” (p. 1152). The suppression of sexuality for the disabled makes it not only non-existent for the disabled but for everyone, where disability is completely segregated from the realm of sexuality.

**Sexual Exclusion**

In addition to disability’s absence within the sexual body ideal, disability is also entirely absent within definitions of sexuality. This passage by Barker, Gill, & Harvey (2018) outlines how current mainstream psychiatry, sexology and sex therapy construct normative sex and sexuality in the following ways:

- Sex is imperative (it is normal and healthy to be sexual).
- Sex occurs in a heteronormative context (sex involves ‘male’ and ‘female’ ‘phenotypically normal’ bodies. Homosexuality was included, in some form, in the DSM until 1986 and the ICD until 1992).
- The normal/functional sexual script involves: desire, arousal, ‘preparatory fondling’, PIV intercourse, and orgasm.
- Normal sex can be distinguished from sex involving non-normative interests. (p. 85)

This definition of normative sex and sexuality, albeit clinical in nature, is ableist and completely excludes disability. The way in which sex is imperative or necessary for individuals, where it is both biological and part of developing a healthy human identity (p. 88) suggests that those who cannot engage in its narrow definition are unhealthy and abnormal, ultimately verging on being less than human. Narrow definitions of sex and sexuality extend the legacy of dehumanizing the disabled. The way the disabled are
dehumanized within definitions of sex and sexuality is best highlighted by the way in which sex is exclusively for phenotypically normal bodies. While the disabled are excluded from sex by the ways in which their sexual queering does not always fulfill all facets of the heteronormative “normal sexual script,” culminating in penetrative orgasm, by lack of choice or ability, since disabilities are a result of genotypic abnormalities that can also manifest phenotypically, the large number of disabled bodies that deviate from the phenotypic norm, under this logic, are incapable of having sex. While active and included sexual subjects are meant to “closely monitor both their desires and their activities against potentially straying into ‘abnormal’ or unacceptable areas: those which deviate too much from, or threaten, normative sex” (p. 104), disabled individuals lack of sexual autonomy is heightened by definitions of sex and sexuality that inherently view them as being sexually deviant and threatening. Arguably “there is a lack of recognition that many people with disabilities do in fact have what would be considered within our culture as ‘normal’ sex” (Esmail et al., 2010, p. 1153), but the research in this essay, to the contrary, suggests that disabled sexual expression does not fit into cultural understandings of normative sex due to the way it continues to be deviantized as abnormal.

This section began by exploring the cultural and societal deviantization of the disabled sexual subject. The cultural understanding of disability as deviance has accumulated in a pervasive discourse of disabled sexual deviance where disability’s intersection with sexuality is located entirely outside the narrow confines of normalcy. Sexual cultural abnormalcy poses real world restrictions on normative identity building, which atypical disabled bodies are traditionally excluded from. The adoption of queer disabled identities has offered a potential means of resistance and inclusion. Additionally, an historical analysis of atypicality was conducted through antiquity, late 18th and early 19th century carnivals and freak shows, through the Nazi period to
illustrate how the deviance ascribed to disabled sexual subjects in the present have deep seated roots that are firmly planted.

**Disabled Sexual Truth & Power**

This history of the disabled being marginalized continues in present day definitions of sex and sexuality that exclude disability almost entirely. Through sexual citizenship for people with disabilities their sexual autonomy can be normalized.

In his widely cited work on the History of Sexuality, philosopher Michel Foucault (1978) posits that sex is “constituted as a problem of truth” (p. 56) or correctness in order to differentiate it from sexual falsehood or deviance. Since the eighteenth century, sexual norms and practices have been regulated through this spectrum of truth and falsehood in an attempt to preserve the purity of society, ultimately ensuring the steady erasure of sexual deviance. The way in which sexual correctness is upheld promotes multifaceted degrees of sexual oppression that not only dictate which norms and practices are acceptable, but also determine which identity formations and body compositions are permissible as well.

Foucault’s theories have been utilized previously within Disability Studies to question constructions of and threats posed against the disabled body (Tremain, 2005, 2015) and I would like to build off existing scholarship by specifically applying Foucault’s work to the context of disability and sexuality (Holmes, 2008).

Sex as a conduit of truth is enacted culturally within texts, which are also curated through norms, where those that deviate too far from the confines of normalcy are read as unsavory and false. Disabled sexual falsehoods prevail within mainstream cinematic texts on disabled sexuality due to the way in which representations of sexual correctness
tend to adhere to culturally palatable and societally acceptable standards of sexual normativity that disabled sexual subjects are perceived to not fully possess. The way in which the limited degrees of sexuality that disabled people are granted within mainstream films are predominantly told through the able-bodied perspective, aptly referred to by Lindemann (2008) as the “ableist gaze” (p. 110), the acclaimed documentary Murderball (Rubin & Shapiro, 2005) being an exception, fails to challenge abled portrayals of disabled sexual expression. The societal norm of illuminating sexual truths promotes narrow and biased portrayals of sexual expression that allow for deviant truths of disabled sexuality to prevail, thus expanding and legitimizing the discourse of disabled sexual expression that has emerged throughout history.

This section will consist of eight parts. I will begin by drawing out how the discourse of sex as truth has evolved historically, before outlining how sex remains a framework of both normativity and regulation. I will then proceed to discuss the polarity of sex and disability and how disabled lived experience and sexual culture have gone largely unrepresented within film.

**Sex as Truth**

How the truth of sex has evolved and acts as a means of regulating bodies needs to be analyzed in order to understand how it marginalizes disabled sexual subjects and reads them as being deviant. Prior to the eighteenth century sex was considered a private marital matter but once talking openly about sex was normalized, often through confession, it became “not only a matter of sensation and pleasure, of law and taboo, but also of truth and falsehood, that the truth of sex became something fundamental, useful, or dangerous, precious or formidable” (Foucault, 1978, p. 56). From this point sex was placed on a continuum between truth and falsehood that would be used to determine societal norms, due to the way the conceptualization of sex as truth demarcates certain sexual realities as normal and other falsehoods as abnormal. This
spectrum was used for societal regulation and was the foundation upon which the falsehood of sex—attributed to atypical bodies labelled as being impure within the eugenics movement—served as justification for their expulsion. Foucault (1978) argues that “the principle of sex as a ‘cause of any and everything’ was the theoretical underside of a confession that had to be thorough, meticulous, and constant” (p. 65). Discovering truth through confession was routinely promoted to attribute all of society’s ills and deviances to sexual falsehoods. The idea of social illness stemming from sexual falsehood once again echoes the rhetoric of the eugenics movement that still remains today¹, and largely impacts disabled people whereby their peripheral social position is inextricably tied to their perceived deviant sexuality, and vice versa.

Additionally, as Foucault argues, within erotic art, truth began to be “experienced as pleasure, evaluated in terms of its intensity, its specific quality, its duration, its reverberations in the body and the soul. Moreover, this knowledge must be deflected back into the sexual practice itself, in order to shape it as though from within and amplify its effects” (1978, p. 57). Within this framework sexual truths are those realities of practice and identity that are most pleasurable in both body and mind. Since disabled people have reduced access to modes of sexual expression, their opportunities for achieving sexual pleasure are minimized, compromising their path to discover their sexual truth. Sexual truths pertaining to those that are pleasurable created a new kind of pleasure, as defined by Foucault:

pleasure in the truth of pleasure, the pleasure of knowing that truth, of discovering and exposing it, the fascination of seeing it and telling it, of captivating and capturing others by it, of confiding it in secret, of luring it out in the open— the specific pleasure of the true discourse on pleasure. (p. 71)

¹ Due to genetic testing, disabilities are routinely eradicated at birth and the disabled are often discouraged from reproducing for fears of passing on their genetics
A transition has occurred from the truth of sex, being about illuminating the realities of sex, to “pleasure in the truth of pleasure”, which is about the pleasures of exposing realities of sexual pleasure. The focus on the pleasure of exposing sexual pleasure, even though pleasure is both highly arbitrary and fluid, particularly compromises disabled sexual expression due to the way that the diverse pleasures of disabled sexual subjects have been misinterpreted and objectified as tangible truths. The desire to understand disabled sexuality in a tangible way suggests that it needs to be contained in order to be acceptable; that its open-endedness is a sign of deviance.

The metanarratives of sex as truth introduced by Foucault (1978) extend the discourse of disabled sexual deviance, as outlined in Chapter 1, due to the way they regard sex and pleasure in very finite terms, which undermine the fluidity of disabled bodies and their sexuality. I aim to explore contestations around the ‘truth’ of sex by drawing on Disability Studies that has critiqued the rigidity imposed on disabled sex by calling into question the normativity and regulatory functions of sex, the definitional opposition of sex and disability, and issues surrounding representation and the absence of cultural texts that explore the lived experiences and sexual culture of disabled people (Markotić, 2016; McRuer & Mollow, 2012; Shuttleworth, 2012; Siebers, 2012; Wilkerson, 2012).

Normativity/regulation

The way sex acts as an arbiter of normativity and regulation adversely impacts disabled sexual subjects. Wilkerson’s articulation of normativity on the disabled body (2012) is particularly relevant to this argument:

The norms of normate sex, it must be understood, do not merely draw boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate desires, behaviors, identities, and spaces. They also effect a privatization of sex, regulating nonnormate sex or
keeping it taboo and under wraps, through a vast array of state and cultural supports for normate sex. (p. 187)

Norms evidently determine what is acceptable in a variety of social spheres. Due to the way norms are largely dictated by governmental and cultural elites, which are both sites in the operation of power, marginalized groups who are voiceless and without power are more heavily scrutinized and threatened by norms. While there are legislative protections for disabled people and cultural texts depicting them, they are frequently created by able-bodied groups that are neither consultative, nor fully aware of both the social and political constraints and exclusions faced by disabled people. Hence the need for the longstanding mantra within the disabled community “Nothing About Us Without Us” (Charlton, 1998). Wilkerson (2012) goes on to articulate how norms dictate how disabled people are both treated and understood:

Sexual norms capture in a particularly gripping way a vast array of rules for social relations; that is, rules for relationships and interactions between and within social groups. Bodies themselves become larger than life in schemas of normate sex, representing broader states and identities, from communities to the nation. The terms of this discourse include sexual practices, identities, desires, and spaces, as well as bodily configurations, singly and in combination. (p. 197)

Since the dominant sexual norms surrounding disability are largely interpreted as being atypical, the subsequent interactions that the able-bodied will have with disabled sexual subjects will be informed by norms that are both peripheral and negatively biased. Sexual norms, according to Wilkerson, influence all facets of disabled sexual expression. If pleasure in illuminating truths of pleasure is the current paradigm for interpreting sex then its framework does not operate independently of norms. Norms restrict all aspects of sexual expression in socially palatable ways. By adhering to societal norms of sexuality, cultural representations of disabled sexual expression are inherently sanitized.
Foucault (1978) observes how sex was primarily understood as a “medical and medicalizable object, [where] one had to try and detect it--as a lesion, a dysfunction, or a symptom--in the depths of the organism, or on the surface of the skin, or among all the signs of behavior” (p. 44). While deviances in sexuality were previously interpreted as physical symptoms, they are now understood largely as social ailments, especially under the influence of sexual norms, which require just as much intrusion and violation in order to be drawn out and made visible. The reliance on sexual norms and “the desire to regard bodies—all bodies—as beholden to an ideal standard of what Erving Goffman calls an "unspoiled identity," on the understanding that bodies failing the norm must be subject to physical modifications, upholds conventional notions of ableism” (Markotić, 2016, p. 2). The way sexual norms and norms in general adhere to an idealized able body means that those with any kind of genetic variation become both physically and socially threatened. Norms have ableism built directly into them.

**Polarity of sex and disability**

In addition to the impact of sexual norms on disabled sexual expression, there is an evident polarity of sex and disability that continuously demarcates the social realms as being separate. McRuer & Mollow (2012) posit that “many influential texts in the field of disability studies can be said to have codified a model identity of a disabled person, who has certain crucial characteristics: his or her body manifests visible difference; physical suffering is not a primary aspect of his or her experience; and he or she is not seeking cure or recovery” (p. 12). Understandings of disability have previously been restricted by the rigidity of the model or ideal disabled body, but it is now understood far more broadly to include the personal and environmental factors of disability that impact the body (World Health Organization, 2011, p. 5) that are part and parcel of the social model of disability. McRuer & Mollow (2012) suggest that “rather than choosing one side of a binary division between normality and disability, we instead emphasize here the
value of keeping these terms fluid and contestable” (p. 13). Their advocacy of keeping terms both “fluid and contestable” allows for the real nuances of disabled sexual expression and disability in general to be made visible by diminishing definitional polarity between normalcy and disability and sex and disability, for example. The threat that polarity poses to disabled sexual expression can be summarized by the way “disability simultaneously figures sexual excess and sexual lack: disabled people are regarded as sexually deficient and therefore not fully human, but at the same time, disabled people register as less than human because disability is the ubiquitous figure for a dehumanizing, identity-disintegrating force that resembles sex” (Mollow, 2012, p. 308).

The humanity of disabled sexual subjects is largely interpreted by their sexuality, where sexual excess is equated with being almost completely human and sexual lack as being not completely human. Problematically, within this duality asexual disabled people are not seen as being human at all. Additionally, “our culture’s desexualization of disabled people functions to defend against a deeply rooted but seldom acknowledged awareness that all sex is incurably, and perhaps desirably, disabled” (Mollow, 2012, p. 310). The “‘abortive, incomplete and undeveloped’ ‘essence’ of sexuality can be understood as disability; it refers to...a ‘biologically dysfunctional process of maturation’ in which ‘we desire what nearly shatters us’ (Freudian 39)” (Bersani as cited in Mollow, 2012, p. 300). By desexualizing the disabled, society can ignore the reality that facets of disability are achieved during sex, such as the bodily disruption that occurs between pain and pleasure, that locate disability closer rather than further from the rest of us. While the polarity between sex and disability “potentially disables recognition of the other” (McRuer & Mollow, 2012, p. 23), we can read it as an illustration of how “sex and disability can enable each other” (p. 24). The way my research explores disability’s intersections with sexuality aims to question how both sex and disability are understood individually and collectively within the cultural mind. Highlighting contestations
surrounding “truths” of disabled sex reinforces the need for more robust frameworks to be adopted that investigate sex as being contested and fluid.

**Deviant truths of disabled sexuality**

The way in which the social niches of disabled sex culture and lived experience are replaced by incomplete and idealized narratives of disabled sexual expression within culture allow for deviant truths or realities of disabled sexual expression to continue to be reproduced, in ways that are socially palatable. The management of narratives of disabled sexual expression and disability in general can be partially attributed to the “public demand for universal experience: you must experience the world as I do (as the rest of "us" do). The constant assertion being to urge disabled people to be more "like the rest of us”” (Markotić, 2016, p. 4). Disabled bodies are frequently inspected for how they can be made less disabled and rendered normal in order to soothe the societal fears of difference. Due to the aversion to otherness, disabled bodies cannot be regarded as entirely normal and must remain classified as lesser than. Subsequently, the maintenance of disabled sexual otherness and our pleasure in investigating it are manifested culturally whereby narratives of disabled sexual expression are built on fragmented and sensationalized constructions of sex and disability, which universalize disabled sexuality as being deviant.

How disabled bodies are deviantized can be attributed to the way “the problem body is the [adj.] body: people and fictional characters who fluctuate across a range of differences, presumed to require that compulsory adjective to allocate a kind of body, a type of body” (p. 6). Disabled bodies are further interpreted as being deviant by the typifications used to demarcate their otherness. The more one’s body deviates from the norm and is problematized increases the deviantized labels ascribed to it. Due to the way in which physically disabled bodies are routinely “constructed as the embodiment
of corporeal insufficiency and deviance, [it] becomes a repository for social anxieties about such concerns as vulnerability, control, and identity” (Garland-Thomson as cited in Markotić, 2016, p. 10). Disabled bodies are deviantized by being interpreted as collections of all of society’s imperfections. Representation of disabled bodies is of vital importance because “how bodies get read, assessed, and interpellated through literature [and culture more generally] continues to inform, determine, regulate, and govern how bodies get treated in the world” (p. 10). For Markotić, the cultural representation of bodies can have immense societal implications for them.

Since “popular culture and the mass media come to serve as the only frames of reference available for the construction of collective and personal identities” (Strinati, 2004, p. 227), accurate representation becomes paramount as well because misinformed portrayals of disabled sexual expression may influence how they view themselves and are seen by others, impacting how their bodies are regulated in reality. The way in which many cinematic narratives of sex and disability, and disability more generally, are constructed through the ableist gaze “that marks disabled bodies as different and, therefore, “abnormal!”” (Lindemann, 2008, p. 110) diminishes the degree of nuance that their representations hold. While the bias of the ableist gaze is difficult to avoid in mainstream cinema, due to the way they are nearly completely produced through abled perspectives that tend to otherize disabled bodies, their adverse impact can be lessened through more diverse representations of disabled sexual experiences beyond just the generic ones.

**Conclusion: Sexual inclusion & Citizenship**

Sexual expression for people with disabilities can begin to be normalized through sexual inclusion, defined by De Boer (2014) as
the recognition of an individual as a sexual being, and his or her physical inclusion in sexual practice(s). In a more complex sense, sexual inclusion depends upon individuals feeling a fuller sense of social inclusion, or an elevated social status that is achieved via being and being seen as a sexual agent. (p. 73)

Sexual inclusion by this definition essentially means that achieving social inclusion comes through sexual agency. This definition is flawed because allegedly being without a sense of sexual agency, which is the case for many disabled people, means they cannot achieve social inclusion. Sexuality is not a prerequisite of social inclusion.

Much like definitions of sexuality itself, perhaps a more nuanced definition beyond “sexual inclusion” is needed to meet the needs of disabled sexual subjects. Tobin Siebers’ (2012) definition of disabled sexual citizenship is much more suitable, which includes:

- access to information about sexuality;
- freedom of association in institutions and care facilities;
- demedicalization of disabled sexuality;
- addressing sexual needs and desires as part of health care;
- reprofessionalization of caregivers to recognize, not deny, sexuality; and
- privacy on demand. (p. 47)

Disabled sexual citizenship is wide ranging and seeks to normalize the varying needs of disabled sexual subjects on a mass scale, reducing their sexual deviantization. Siebers seeks to educate people on the many obstacles that the disabled need to overcome in order to access their sexual citizenship. The push toward sexual citizenship for people with disabilities illustrates their marginalized status as sexual participants. “Perhaps when the definition of sexuality within our culture becomes more flexible and comprehensive, there will be no concept of ‘normal’ versus ‘different’ but rather all forms of sexual expression will be embraced” (Esmail et al., 2010, p. 1153), where disabled sexual citizenship is universalized.
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Introduction: Sex & Disability On Screen

While disability has moved beyond the conceptualization of asexuality (McRuer & Mollow, 2012; Shakespeare, Gillespie-Sells, & Davies, 1996), disabled sexual expression\(^2\) still seems to be conceived of culturally as something that is atypical. The atypical or deviant quality given to disabled sexual expression may stem in part from the way disability in general is presented on screen as being “unnatural’ and entirely undesirable” (Markotic, 2008, p. 5). The undesirability of disability is echoed in the way, according to McRuer & Mollow (2012) that “the sexuality of disabled people is typically depicted in terms of either tragic deficiency or freakish excess” (p. 1). Sexual expression for the disabled therefore seems to be regarded along a spectrum of deviance, outside the confines of “normal” sexual expression. If Dahl’s (1987) argument that “the prevalent sociocultural attitude towards disability is that of deviance” (p. 56) still holds true, then disabled sexual subjects continue to be “narrative[ly] manage[d]” (Budde, 2008, p. 45) as being deviant.

My research builds of the work of Nikolaidis (2013) who posits that films can offer “a discursive and cultural means of articulating both gender and disability, especially disability and sexuality” (p. 759). While numerous films have portrayed disabled sexual subjects in recent American cinema, in The Shape of Water (del Toro, 2017), The Fundamentals of Caring (Burnett, 2016), Me Before You (Sharrock, 2016) and The

\(^2\) Due to the additional complexities and ethical issues surrounding sex for people with developmental disabilities, disabled sexual expression will be analysed here in terms of physical disability.
Sessions (Lewin, 2012), and in the Bollywood film Margarita with a Straw (Bose, 2014), disabled sexual expression continues to be discursively and culturally articulated as deviant. Very limited research has been published on the intersection between sex and disability within these films.

This essay will analyze a corpus of mainstream cinematic and performance texts focused exclusively on the sexuality of people with disabilities, including dramatic portrayals of the sexual coming of age of people with disabilities in Margarita with a Straw (Bose, 2014) and The Sessions (Lewin, 2012), science-fiction films The Shape of Water (del Toro, 2017) and Pulse (Cruz-Martin, 2017), the Spanish documentary Yes, we fuck! (Centeno & De La Morena, 2015), and the live performance Magic & Remembering (Brand, 2019). I have selected these texts as best examples of both representations of the discourse of disabled sexual deviance in contemporary film and documentary and performance portrayals of sexuality from the disabled perspective that counteract disabled sexual deviance.

I aim to evaluate the representations of sexuality and disability within cinematic and performance texts, through a multi-media analysis of dramatic, documentary and science-fiction film, in addition to live performing art, to explore how the incorporation of disabled perspectives within cultural texts on sex and disability have the potential to radically reconceptualise understandings of sex and disability. I hope my research will thoughtfully contribute to the literature by providing scholarship on a plethora of cultural texts pertaining to sexuality and disability, and a synthesis of a variety of disabled perspectives on its intersection, in order to challenge and deconstruct the deviance attributed to disabled sexual expression.

The dramatic and sci-fi films touched on in this essay encompass a discourse of disabled sexual deviance due to the way they portray disabled sexual expression as being outside the norm, by respectively showing in Margarita with a Straw (Bose, 2014)
and *The Sessions* (Lewin, 2012) how the disabled fail in their desires to find love and how their sexual expression is solely limited to encounters with emotionally disconnected sexual partners, and in *The Shape of Water* (del Toro, 2017) and *Pulse* (Cruz-Martin, 2017), where sexuality and love can only be found beyond the confines of the disabled body. Alternatively, the documentary *Yes, we fuck!* (Centeno & De La Morena, 2015) and the live performance *Magic & Remembering* (Brand, 2019), two cultural texts told from the disabled perspective, seem to directly challenge discourses of disabled sexual deviance through their representation of a diversity of disabled sexual practices and identities, and their performativity of disabled ways of movement and intimacy.

Discourses of disabled deviance are exceedingly problematic due to the way they negatively delimit disabled sexual expression as “abnormality or anomaly, rather than the pure, clean norm” (Perlin & Lynch, 2016, p. 122). While some disabled people do positively embrace their sexual queering, the act of doing so is infrequently represented, if at all.

The discourse of disabled deviance can also be seen throughout the literature on the sexual expression of people with disabilities. While films on sex and disability have the potential to “open up an ambiguous discursive space where binaries between gendered and disabled identities are debased and the lines separating them are blurred” (Nikolaidis, 2013, p. 762), due to the way the static deviance of disabled sexual subjects adheres to “cultural notions of disability [that] exclude the possibility of sexual freedom and intimacy” (Crawford & Ostrove, 2003, p. 182), the hopes of such boundary and identity blurring are largely extinguished. For people with disabilities their sexuality continues to be “constructed as either threatening or amusing” (Wilton, 2003, p. 371), or interpreted according to Murphy (1987) as ‘malignant’ (as cited in Wilton, 2003, p. 371), which acts to reinforce the atypical qualities ascribed to their sexual expression.
The way in which sex and disability tends to be regarded in medical terms “constructs the sexuality of disabled persons as “inappropriate” or nonexistent” (Crawford & Ostrove, 2003, p. 182), continuing the classification of the disabled as asexual. Medical interpretations of disabled sexual expression have immense “interpersonal and relational consequences [that] have been particularly salient for women” (p. 181). Among them, disabled women are believed to be “unable to contribute to meaningful reciprocal relationships. Gay and lesbian advocates often dismiss women with disabilities as the helpless antithesis of everything they are trying to accomplish in disrupting conventional gender roles in relationships” (p. 183). The way disabled women are subjected to increased sexual marginalization is experienced by Laila, the bisexual protagonist of *Margarita with a Straw*. The fact that she does not feel wholeheartedly loved by her sexual partners could be a result of them potentially regarding her as an inferior romantic partner. Being perceived as inferior also offers a possible explanation for why the protagonist of *The Sessions* Mark O’Brien struggles to find romantic partners willing to emotionally invest themselves in him until the end of the film. By limiting the portrayals of disabled sexual subjects to the realm of deviance within “our cultural discourse serves to perpetuate these limitations on relationships” (p. 191) that have negative real life implications for the disabled. Due to the way “belittling or demeaning the Other through such bodily markers as race, gender, or even sexuality have been….relegated to characters depicted as unsavory” (Markotic, 2008, p. 8), such as disabled sexual subjects, the “flux of desire” (Weeks, 2015, p. 1093) is delimited to exclude otherness, disabled or otherwise.

To further investigate the potential for cultural texts such as films to promote boundary and identity blurring for disabled sexual subjects, applying queer theory on sexuality and identity to the disabled context is a useful starting place. While we live in “a world of acknowledged, and apparently ever-increasing, sexual and gender diversity”
(Weeks, 2015, p. 1092), for people with disabilities their sexuality exists within the range of deviance or nonexistence. According to Weeks (2015) “sexuality, sexual identities, sexual categories, and meanings are not neutral, objective descriptors, but entangled and shaped in a complex nexus of power relations and historical residues” (p. 1092).

Disabled people often lack the power to challenge the identity markers of deviance that able-bodied people and institutions ascribe to them, which originate from a rich history of ‘disabled’ deviantization. Due to the way in which “the available, received cultural narratives of disability – similar to those of the gender, [sexuality] and race systems – are pre-judicial, oppressive, and disempowering” (Garland-Thomson, 2005, p. 1568) the cultural experiences of disabled sexual identity are inherently decontextualized and misinformed. Weeks (2015) argues that we are:

> At the mercy of the words, concepts, categories, and languages that envelop the world of sexuality, which attempt to tell us who we are, but are often hopelessly inadequate for embracing the messy, contradictory, wilful subjectivities, desires, emotions, social positionings, diverse forms of agency, and ways of being in the world that constitute us as sexed and gendered. (p. 1093)

The representations of disabled sexual expression within the genres of dramatic and sci-fi film that are visible portray it as being utterly insignificant, denying the pleasure of disabled sexual subjects. The denial of pleasure keeps disabled sexual expression in the category of deviance.

> While “sexual identities are arbitrary impositions on the flux of sexual possibilities” (p. 1096), people with disabilities have taken it upon themselves to challenge medical and normative notions of disability by subverting sex and gender categories as a means of resistance and inclusion. An act of subversion can be seen in the way Raab (2007) observes how people with disabilities respond to their “denied gender and sexual belonging [through] an oppositional stance of ‘confiscated
gender/sexuality’ (‘Geschlechtlichkeit’)” (as cited in Yekani, Michaelis, & Dietze, 2011, p. 87), which acts as a means of expanding rigid categories of gender and sexuality. This is an example of the way people with disabilities use their marginality to their benefit. Additionally, “the way in which disabled people negotiate their sexuality implies a certain queer relationality to heteronormative regimes” (Yekani et al., 2011, p. 87), where people with disabilities use their sexual difference as a means of empowerment. Disabled sexual expression is arguably a direct challenge to heteronormativity. The way in which people with disabilities use their outside status to reformulate narrow understandings of sex and gender is demonstrative of the way "sexualized identities matter above all to the sexually marginalized…They provide the basis for resistance, subversion, and social action” (Weeks, 2015, p. 1095).

According to Durbach (2009), while “the terms may have changed, the cultural meanings attached to physical difference have remained constant” (p. 16). This essay aims to outline how the discourse of disabled sexual deviance has remained largely unchanged culturally and the role that disabled cultural critique can play in deconstructing contrived understandings of disabled sexual expression.

**Sex culture**

The cultural interweaving of sex and disability could significantly reformulate understandings of disabled sexual expression through the visibility of disabled sexual culture. According to Tobin Siebers, “One of the chief stereotypes oppressing disabled people is the myth that they do not experience sexual feelings or that they do not have or want to have sex—in short, that they do not have a sexual culture” (Siebers, 2012, p. 39). The myth that the disabled are entirely sexless and completely void of sexual culture is pervasive and poses an ongoing threat to disabled sexual expression. Sexual culture is summarized by Siebers as,
a concept to provide a deeper, more sustained idea of how sex and identity interconnect by resisting the partitioning and privatization characteristic of a sex life. It means to liberate sex, allowing it to overflow the boundaries of secured places and to open up greater sexual access for people with disabilities. (p. 40).

Disabled sexual culture regards sex as being highly fluid, which gives it permission to overflow and spill over into all spaces, creating increased sexual accessibility. Analogous to the threats posed against disabled sexual culture, the visibility of queer sexual culture has similarly been impeded by “heteronormative conventions of intimacy [that] block the building of nonnormative or explicit public sexual cultures” (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 553). In order for the queer movement to combat the heteronormative structures upholding sex, “making a queer world has required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation” (p. 558). Similarly, the disabled have also had to reconceptualize abled understandings of sex and intimacy in order to maintain their own sexual culture. The aim of the queer project Berlant & Warner imagine “is to support forms of affective, erotic, and personal living that are public in the sense of accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity” (p. 562). Cultural texts on sex and disability have the potential to be immensely influential in terms of normalizing disabled sexual expression if they can enable and become part of an active public disabled sexual culture. While films like The Sessions and Margarita with a Straw do bring sex and disability into the mainstream cultural mind, their narrow portrayals of disabled sexual subjects told from the ableist gaze promote a retrievable and sustained public sexual culture pertaining to the disabled that is biased, and in direct opposition to contestations surrounding disabled sexual ‘truths’.

Lived experience
In addition to the potential of sex culture to broaden understandings of disabled sexual expression, the inclusion of more diverse lived experiences of disabled sex within culture could also broaden societal views on the subject. While there is a lack of representations of nuanced lived experiences of disabled sex within culture, even "much of the new work in disability studies on sexuality tends to focus upon representations and discursive structures, rather than on disabled people’s interpretations of experience and of the multiple barriers that can impede their sexual expression" (Shuttleworth, 2012, p. 55). There seems to be an evident separation between representation and lived experience that diverse cultural portrayals may begin to bridge. An aspect of lived sexual experience infrequently represented within culture is the way in which disabled sexual subjects experience “internalized oppression…[that can] better be described as an embodied incorporation of adverse cultural meanings and habituation to sociosexual rejection” (p. 63).

While *The Sessions* and *Margarita with a Straw* pay some attention to the experience of sociosexual rejection, they do so in glorified ways. Mark in the former can overcome it by finding love whereas Laila in the latter can avoid it by being content with practicing self-love. Disabled people may have these experiences of redirecting their tolerance of rejection but representations of how disabled people confront their internalized oppression head on may illuminate more about informed experiences of disabled sexual expression. Cultural representations of sex and disability could offer more expansive portrayals of lived sexual experiences by showcasing how many disabled people are skilled at “‘defusing the adverse context of disability and desirability’; that is, they were able to psychically, emotionally, and socially render virtually impotent the cultural meanings and interpersonal relations that worked to deny their sexuality” (p. 63). An informed film on sex and disability could be centered around a disabled individual’s struggle in overcoming their conflict between disability and
desirability, both interpersonally, which *The Sessions* and *Margarita with a Straw* begin to delve into, and culturally.

Foucault (1978) outlines how sex acts as a means of coming of age and becoming in touch with one’s complete self:

It is through sex—in fact, an imaginary point determined by the deployment of sexuality—that each individual has to pass in order to have access to his own intelligibility (seeing that it is both the hidden aspect and the generative principle of meaning), to the whole of his body (since it is a real and threatened part of it, while symbolically constituting the whole), to his identity (since it joins the force of a drive to the singularity of a history). (pp. 155–156).

The structures of sexuality and normativity have constituted sex as the access point to intelligence, body, and identity. If mainstream cultural texts on sex and disability want to challenge the notion of sex being the access-point to the self, they need to represent a variety of lived sexual experiences rather than simplistic ones, such as those of sexual coming of age stories in *The Sessions* and *Margarita with a Straw*. This broadening in representation would provide more frames of reference in which people could access diverse experiences of disabled sexual expression. According to Foucault, “The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures” (p. 157). Presently, the pleasure we glean from the truth of pleasure built into our cultural texts on sexuality portray peripheral narratives and realities of disabled sexual expression that are socially satisfying and highly decontextualized. The representation of lived sexual experiences of both body and pleasure could potentially begin to deconstruct the oppressive structures of sexuality.

**The cyborg**

Another theoretical framework in which disability can be understood is through Donna Haraway’s (1991) myth of the cyborg, outlined in the “Cyborg Manifesto”.

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Haraway defines the cyborg as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (Haraway, 1991, p. 291) that stands as a metaphor for fragmented subjectivity. The fragmented subjectivities that the cyborg allows for are pertinent to the disabled subject given that disabled subjectivities are often multiple, due to the way disability and its identities tend to be frequently misunderstood. While the cyborg has the potential to enable multiple disabled subjectivities to emerge, through the way the blurring of identities occurs across boundaries, which the hybridization of the cyborg provokes, the “actual experiences of such [identity] blurring” (Kafer, 2013, p. 115) have been visibly left out of the manifesto. The “Cyborg Manifesto’s” only direct mention of disability is seen through the cyborg’s hybridization of machine and organism, where “our sense of connection to our tools is heightened... Perhaps paraplegics and other severally handicapped people can have the most intense experiences of complex hybridization with other communication devices” (Haraway, 1991, p. 313-14). Haraway’s conceptualization of the cyborg enabling a hybridization between disabled people and their assistive devices is disempowering due to the way it equates the potential of disabled people exclusively with the capabilities of their assistive devices. For a progressive feminist text its inclusion of disability is very objectifying and leaves much to be desired.

The way in which the concept of the cyborg objectifies disability is an example of how the cyborg universalizes disability (Kafer, 2013, p. 112), furthering the way disability is generalized. The potential for the cyborg to empower multiple subjectivities and to challenge generalized conceptualizations of disability is manifested through the post-structuralist principles of de-centering the subject and the incoherency of discourse. If discourse is incoherent and disconnected then meaning is no longer a given but rather something that comes from the way in which it is contested and struggled over. The contestation of discourse and how things are made to mean is visible within the cyborg
where “sex, sexuality and reproduction are central actors in high-tech myth systems structuring our imaginations of personal and social possibility” (Haraway, 1991, p. 306-7). The understandings of sex and sexuality and how they are reimagined through the myth of the cyborg create new meanings with significant social possibilities. While the cyborg myth has the opportunity to reimagine how disability is understood, instead it enhances how disability is objectified and generalized. Haraway goes on to argue: “In the realm of knowledge, the result of sexual objectification, not alienation, is the consequence of the structure of sex/gender. In the realm of knowledge, the result of sexual objectification is illusion and abstraction” (Haraway, 1991, p. 299). This discussion of sexual objectification as it pertains to the “realm of knowledge,” or the way in which concepts are understood, is relevant to cultural imaginings of disability due to the way sexual objectification of people with disabilities creates the “abstraction” that sexuality for people with disabilities is abhorrent.

Desired perceptions of disability need to adhere to how it is understood at any given time. Therefore, perception and knowledge are inextricably connected. How disability is understood can begin to be changed through representations of it. This can be observed through the way the disabled consumer group “presents a perception of [the disabled] self as not dependent, as sharing power, and as competent” (Dahl, 1987, p. 28), allowing disability to “gradually come to have a different meaning to society” (Dahl, 1987, p. 28). Through this positive presentation of disability it can come to have a more accurate and less generalized meaning, which hopefully would be adopted within cultural portrayals of the subject.

**Textual Analysis of *The Sessions***

Within *The Sessions* there is a reliance on voiceover to tell Mark’s sexual truths posthumously that creates an abnormal aura throughout the film, emphasizing a theme of deviantized sexual expression across it. The abnormal aura stemming from Mark
recounting his sexual desires occurs early in the film when he interviews a woman named Amanda for a position as a personal support worker. During the interview he says via voiceover: “Amanda.” Amanda would have been a pretty girl, to touch, to hold, to kiss” (Lewin, 2012). A few scenes later Amanda leaves after he tells her he loves her. He recites the poem again, but this time with the extended ending “to take to bed” (Lewin, 2012), adding to the perverse feeling surrounding it. Amanda in quotation marks is meant to indicate that this is the title of one of Mark’s poems. The strangeness surrounding his inner and private desires being verbalised accentuates the way disabled sexual expression is deviantized within it. In another scene where Amanda is giving him therapeutic massage, as part of the duties of her job, Mark’s sexual desires are articulated when his inner voice declares: “All I wished for were hands that moved…just to touch her” (Lewin, 2012). Wishing he had the ability to touch of his own volition is obviously something some disabled people do experience. At the same time, the way Mark’s desires are frequently expressed in professional and work related interactions of interviews and therapeutic massage, would be considered inappropriate, and imbue his sexuality with a deviant quality. While the cinematic device of voiceover was likely used throughout the film to represent Mark’s introspective qualities, which are evident in his article “On Seeing A Sex Surrogate” (O’Brien, 1990) that The Sessions is loosely based on, the way the voiceover allows his voice to unnaturally echo and be heard by the audience, rather than just being confined within his own mind, gives his perspective on his sexual expression an otherworldly, even abnormal quality. Much later in the film his sexuality is further deviantized when he starts writing love poetry to his surrogate Cheryl and mailing it to her house, indicating his obsession with her.

In addition to the maintenance of sexual deviance through voiceover, disabled sexual otherness is also furthered by The Sessions’ portrayal of disabled sexual truth telling that occurs primarily through religious and medical confession. As mentioned in
Essay 1, confession was used as a means of uncovering truths of sex that would be used to justify the categorization of bodies on a continuum between normalcy and deviance. Under this framework, bodies rendered as deviant such as the disabled would be blamed for society’s ills and extinguished under eugenics. A transition would later occur from the truth of sex to the pleasure in the truth of pleasure, where the pleasure gleaned from uncovering truths of pleasure, regardless of their depth or actuality, would cause true experiences of disabled sexual pleasure to go unnoticed, allowing biased articulations of disabled pleasure to go uncontested. While *The Sessions* does give a couple of accounts of disabled sexual pleasure when Mark interviews people for a column that he is writing on sex and disability, the way Mark discusses his sexual truths rather than the truth of his pleasure within confession, labels his sexual expression as abnormal. Sexual deviance can be seen in his confession: “My penis speaks to me, Father Brendan. Sometimes I ejaculate during a bed bath in front of my attendants. All I feel is shame and mortification while other men apparently get pleasure” (Lewin, 2012). The way he refers to his sexual experiences in very clinical terms and associates them with shame and those of other men with pleasure, that he seemingly cannot access, marks his sexuality as aberrant. After this scene deviantizes his sexuality he then goes on to lose his virginity to a sex surrogate. While surrogacy normalizes sexual expression for him, due to the way sex work remains taboo and largely considered unsavory, problematizes his sexuality even further. Additionally, he describes how God does not deny his sexuality but points out how “useless” (Lewin, 2012) it is after he ejaculates unpredictably during his first few sessions with a surrogate, invalidating his sexuality.

In addition to religious confession, *The Sessions* also portrays medical confession that highlights societal pleasures in the truth of pleasure, diminishing the illumination of informed sexual truths. Cheryl documents Mark’s sexual truths when she voice records her observations from her therapy sessions with him. She observes that
“he believes he doesn’t deserve sex” and that his masochistic fantasies reinforce “the idea of being punished” (Lewin, 2012), demarcating his sexuality as deviant. Later, Mark refers to his sexuality in very clinical terms when he says that “Maybe intercourse would prove I was an adult…[but] maybe I don’t want to cross that line” (Lewin, 2012). Mark understands adulthood as a rite of passage that can only be achieved through the heterosexual act of intercourse. He internalizes the idea that his sexual lack makes him less of an adult, extending his sexual deviantization. The way the film oscillates between scenes of therapy and religious and medical confession that deviantize disabled sexual expression creates a visual through-line of voyeurism, which objectify disabled sexual subjects as abnormal.

**Textual Analysis of Margarita with a Straw**

Throughout *Margarita with a Straw* there is a perpetual quest for disabled sexual normalcy that goes unfulfilled, suggesting that disabled people have abnormal and unsatisfactory sexual expression. Early in the film, after Laila tells her writing assistant Jared that she wants to write about the intimacy she experienced in her first relationship, he interjects in a surprised tone: “You mean you’ve had sex?” (Bose, 2014). His state of surprise that she has had sex is emblematic of the shock factor that disabled sex lives are routinely met with by the able-bodied. Later, after Khanum, Laila’s visually impaired girlfriend, suggests that they move in together, she declares that Laila’s parents, “even in their wildest dreams…wouldn’t guess that we’re lovers!” (Bose, 2014) which highlights how the existence of disabled sexual expression is often ignored and unacknowledged, in addition to being met with shock, two attributes that regard it as something aberrant. The deviance ascribed to disabled sexual subjects can be particularly detrimental due to the way it can directly threaten the disabled body. *Margarita with a Straw* directly addresses how sexual deviance impacts two of its LGBTQ characters. Khanum recalls how when she told her parents she was gay she was met with physical and emotional
abuse and eventually “My mother took me to a doctor... As if I had some disease that could be cured” (Bose, 2014). While referring to how conversion therapy was used in an attempt to erase her gayness, the mechanism of cure is also regularly applied to disability as well. Her sexual deviance is intimately intertwined with her disability and her multiple oppression as a woman of color. Her sexual deviance is ultimately heightened by her increased otherness. Similar to the abuse Khanum faced when revealing her sexuality, when Laila tells her mother that she is bisexual and that Khanum is her girlfriend she responds by saying “yuck…this isn’t normal”. Laila retorts: “That's what the world said about me too” (Bose, 2014). Laila’s comparison between how her bisexuality is regarded as abnormal to the way her disability is also seen as abnormal as well is indicative of the significance both identity markers play in her queer identity.

The quest for and the desire to be normal depicted throughout the film are internalized by Laila to reinforce her disabled sexual deviance. Early in the film, Laila’s friend Dhruv tells her “being friends with “normal” people won't make you "normal"” (Bose, 2014), highlighting the commonly perpetuated dichotomy between abled as normal and disabled as abnormal. In terms of sexual normalcy, at the beginning of their relationship, Khanum asks Laila “Have you ever dated?” and Laila replies by saying “Why would anyone date me?” Khanum proceeds to ask, “Why do you put yourself down all the time?” and Laila responds by saying, “Because that has been my experience” (Bose, 2014). This exchange demonstrates that Laila has internalized that she is abnormal to the point that she does not believe that anyone would want to date her. This scene is rather peculiar given that a few scenes before it she wants to recount experiences of her first relationship to her writing instructor, negating her feeling of not knowing if anyone would date her. Laila’s quest for sexual normalcy resurfaces, to her detriment, when, after she confesses to Khanum that she cheated on her with Jared, Khanum angrily asks: “So by fucking you, Jared gave you a certificate of “normalcy”?”
Laila replies by saying that “Jared could see me” (Bose, 2014). In this scene, Khanum suggests that Laila’s sexual normalcy can be acquired through an able-bodied person fucking her. Her reasoning that “Jared could see me” not only affirms Khanum’s question but also maliciously extends it through the double entendre of the word see, because her girlfriend is visually impaired. Laila desires to be literally and figuratively seen as normal and being with another disabled person, especially one who is blind, makes that impossible. Her belief that relationships where both partners are disabled only results in abnormality fervently reinforces disabled sexual deviance. The way in which she throws over her girlfriend for an able bodied man represents disabled people as being entirely inadequate romantic partners. Her quest for normalcy and the desire to achieve it in part by being with someone who has an able body cements the disabled as being abnormal and unworthy of love.

The resolution of sexual deviance is solidified in the film’s ends when Laila visits the salon and tells her friend over the phone “I have a date” (Bose, 2014), before going on a date with herself, where she orders a margarita with a straw. While the final seen can be read as a liberating act of self-love, it also harmfully suggests that disabled people can only achieve sexual normalcy and acceptance in solitude, where the only people who can possibly see the disabled as normal are themselves.

**Cultural Understandings of Disability & Sexuality**

**Media cultural influence**

Portrayals of sex and disability are important due to the way media representations of disability have significant cultural and societal influence. Dahl (1987) notes that perceptions of disability are “developed in response to, and in a connection with what the media presents as images of the normal and abnormal in our culture” (p.
According to Dahl (1993), the way perceptions of the disabled self are intimately linked to normalized media images of disability is indicative of the major role media images can play in identity formation:

Repeated presentation of images in an acceptable and palatable manner will result in those images becoming a typification of everyday existence. The media are efficient in implanting new information and contributing new ideas and values, where they are not in conflict with strongly held views. (para. 11).

Due to the way media images of disability are frequently presented as abnormal influences how disabled identities become typified as such. Controversially, these images are often taken at face value because they are in accordance with what people understand disability to mean. Media images mirroring cultural meaning can partially be explained through the way in which the “mass media, are the medium which organizes and articulates what has already been implicit in the cultural milieu” (Dahl, 1987, p. 29), suggesting that the mass media reflect how social constructs such as disability are understood culturally. Due to the way “the media promote certain images of the disabled by selectively covering certain events and ignoring others” (Dahl, 1993, para. 7), only atypical identity formations are encouraged. Disabled people who attempt to adopt more ‘normal’ identities are only labeled as being more deviant due to the way their disabled identities remain atypical and outside the norm.

A major aspect of the cultural influence of media representations of disability is the way in which disabled characters are portrayed on screen. Character portrayals present acceptable identities for us to occupy and fit into. We tend to look for media images in which we can readily see ourselves in so that we can validate our identities. It becomes exceedingly difficult for alternative disabled cultural identities to prevail when “characters presented on screen are sociological and sociocultural stereotypes designed to appeal to the majority of viewers and reflect widely held values” (Dahl, 1987, p. 73).
Typifications of disability are reinforced through the way disabled characters are oversimplified as stereotypes. Once the disabled are stereotyped their abnormal and deviant identities become fixed, making them next to impossible to escape.

Typifications of disability are made visible in *The Sessions* (2012) and *Margarita, with a Straw* (2014), two films that dramatize the disabled sexual coming of age. While these films have made strides in representing the disabled as sexual beings, they still problematically depict experiences of disabled sexuality as non-existent, outside of singular moments of intimate relationality with other individuals, or as something to engage in atypically. By typecasting disabled sexuality as being contained within a particular moment within these films’ narrative structures, disabled sexual expression is rendered as abnormal, heightening the deviance prescribed on disabled bodies and identities. The way these films depict disabled sexual experiences as being impermanent and irregular thus homogenizes disabled sexual expression. While Dahl argues that “the mass media can be an effective vehicle for bringing about greater understanding, and a consequent gradual change in public perceptions, of people with disabilities” (Dahl, 1993, para. 1), the way in which disability is constantly typified and represented as an aberration has remained almost completely static, keeping perceptions in a negative stranglehold.

The way in which the films listed above specifically typify disabled sexual expression as impermanent and abnormal are useful for trying to understand why disability continues to be understood in terms of deviance. The atypicality of disabled sexual expression is maintained through depictions of it as being short-lived, reinforcing the undesirability of disability. The unappealing quality of fleeting disabled sexual expression is highlighted through the way in which it is portrayed within unfulfilling moments of intimate relationality in *The Sessions* and as being gratifying only in solitude in *Margarita, with a Straw*. The way *The Sessions* imagines disabled sexual expression
exclusively within individual moments of intimate relationality, by that I mean momentous real-life sexual interactions with other people, is especially problematic given how people with disabilities struggle for sexual agency, where their choice to express themselves sexually is often in the hands of their caregivers, who they are often completely reliant on for support and access. An excellent visual example of the way disabled sexual expression is limited to instances of intimate relationality can be seen within The Sessions’ depiction of disability activist Mark O’Brien’s sessions with a sex surrogate. His sexual deviance is heightened through paying for sex that is seen as unsavory.

Laila, the bisexual protagonist of Margarita, with a Straw, possesses a problematized body as a result of the problem identities that she occupies, where her sexuality is multiply marked as undesirable due to her race, sexual orientation and disability. The film specifically promotes the atypicality of disabled sexual expression through its portrayal of Laila expressing herself within several moments of intimate relationality with various individuals that ultimately leave her heart-broken and unfulfilled. The film alternatively provides a resolution of self-love, suggesting that she would be most intimately fulfilled in solitude, implying that disabled people would gain the most benefit from engaging in their sexual expression alone. Therefore, if disabled people should only engross themselves in their sexuality, then people who are intimate with people with disabilities are also rendered as deviant. There becomes no typical way for anyone to grapple with disabled sexual functionality. Margarita, with a Straw, while countering The Sessions portrayal of disabled sexual expression existing exclusively within instances of intimate relationality, harmfully suggests that disabled people can only be completely loved by loving themselves, rather than being loved by others. The misconception that disabled people cannot be loved by others increases the undesirability attributed to them. The abnormal quality of disabled sexual expression is
reinforced by the portrayal of disabled people needing to seek sexual gratification in
atypical ways, such as through self-love, adding to their deviance.

The way disabled sexual expression is reduced to experiences of intimate
relationality, and their struggles for sexual agency embodied within that depiction,
outlines some of the many ways disabled people have their sexuality curtailed, further
magnifying their need for agency and sexual autonomy. How disability is narratively
managed shapes the frames of reference in which we come to know it culturally. These
staged visual representations of disability are often interpreted as stand-ins for disability
itself, due to the way people rarely interact with disability on a personal level.
Representations of disability remain unchallenged due to the lack of direct
correspondences with it.

While *The Sessions* negatively reinforces the undesirability of disabled sexual
expression, it does however portray a reimagining of the cyborg that is more disability
positive. Actual experiences of disability, such as their multiple subjectivities, are
empowered within Alison Kafer’s (2013) concept of “cripping the cyborg…[which
advocates for] recognizing that our bodies are not separate from our political practices;
nor our uses of them are ahistorical or apolitical” (p. 120). She provides examples of people successfully “cripping the cyborg” when they use their
experiences with “technologies to force people—disabled and nondisabled—to confront
our ableist assumptions about disability and sexuality” (p. 120). While the cyborg myth
reduces people to their assistive devices, “cripping the cyborg” uses assistive technology
as a means of combatting ableism. “Crippling the cyborg” is portrayed in *The Sessions*
through the ways in which Mark uses the technologies of the gurney to navigate the
world and an iron lung to help him breathe that enable him to go about expressing
himself sexually, which simultaneously introduces his personal support workers to the
fact that people with disabilities have sexual desire and a need for sexual expression.
The way in which Mark crips the cyborg gives his team of personal support workers direct knowledge of disability, providing them with informed comprehensions of it within their primary groups, which has the potential of leading to more accurate societal meanings of disability.

**Deviance and normalization in the dramatic films**

Normalization:

The major advantages of both *The Sessions* and *Margarita with a Straw* lie in the visibility of disabled sexual subjects that they generate, normalizing the idea that the disabled do have sex. While the lack of visibility impacts their likelihood of being included by the able-bodied, visual absences seem to be most detrimental for the disabled due to the way they compromise their constructions of themselves as sexual. The harm caused by the lack in visibility of the disabled as sexual is encapsulated in Eli Clare’s (2015) reflection that “in the absence of sexual gaze of any kind directed at us—wanted or unwanted—we lose ourselves as sexual beings. I almost don’t have words for what this absence, this loss, means in my life. It has been a gaping hole, a desolate fog, and a “normal” everyday fact“ (p. 131). By seeing images of other disabled people being sexual, the ‘desolate fog’ exacerbated by invisibility begins to dissipate, providing the clarity needed for the disabled to see that they can be sexual and are sexual. Clare’s metaphor poignantly illustrates how taxing and unabating the denial of disabled sexual expression can be for this minority group. Visibility serves as a means of liberation by normalizing the idea that the disabled are sexual beings.

*The Sessions* normalizes the way in which the disabled are autonomous sexual subjects by representing how the disabled often choose to express themselves sexually and to take governance over their sexuality through sexual surrogacy. The film thoughtfully portrays the process for disabled people to engage in sexual surrogacy and
some of the mental and social struggles associated with doing so, for both the client and surrogate. *Margarita with a Straw* provides much needed representation of the queer disabled relationships that disabled people are often engaged in. The film explores the queer relationship building and sexual practices of a bisexual, disabled, woman of color. The frequency in which she actively participates in romantic connections combats the myth that people are only intimate with the disabled out of pity or as a result of sheer luck. Disabled people are depicted throughout the film as worthy intimate partners.

In order to more fully empower the disabled as sexual citizens, particularly “within disability communities and in mainstream culture, we need images—honest, solid, shimmering, powerful, joyful images—of crip bodies and sexuality” (Clare, 2015, p. 135). Images that sparkle of the brilliant mosaic of disabled sexuality, that Clare promotes, can only be seen by purifying the representations that already exist. *The Sessions* and *Margarita with a Straw* provide a base in which disabled sexual expression is normalized and can be built on to generate more honest and thought provoking representations of disabled sex.

Deviance:

While the advantages of these films revolve around the normalization of disabled sexual expression, the norms represented within them also have numerous disadvantages as well. The harm that norms surrounding disabled sexuality can generate is demonstrated by Malinowska’s (2018) assertion that the “mainstreaming [of] disabled sexuality in popular representations is what depoliticizes disability and, as such, contributes to further distorting socio-cultural norms about disability” (p. 366). The popularization of images of disabled sex to satisfy the abled gaze are ahistorical sanitizations of disabled sexual selfhood and culture. The way images and norms of disabled sexuality within these films are constructions of ableism demonstrate how the
disabled perspective is routinely erased, continuing the legacy of “symbolic annihilation” (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p. 182).

By representing disabled sex almost exclusively “in terms of ableness” (Malinowska, 2018, p. 369) within mainstream cinematic texts shatters any real chance of seeing the disabled sexual mosaic come to life on screen for mass consumption. While there are issues in the mainstreaming of marginalized groups and their social functions, such as sensationalizing experiences of sexuality and disability, there is a growing movement within the disabled community to call on Hollywood and its elites to promote representational diversity by casting disabled people in disabled roles and to let us tell our own stories as active members of the production team. This call to action, while nothing new, is starting to gain traction and if disabled people within the film industry started to be granted a degree of the equity of their able-bodied peers they would have an immense platform in which to share their real experiences to a large audience. The mainstreaming of actual disabled experiences would make disability issues more visible and greatly increase opportunities for awareness.

Within both *The Sessions* and *Margarita with a Straw* disabled sexual expression is predominantly represented in terms of deviance, which normalizes the atypical quality of disabled sexuality. A major issue with the deviant representation in “*The Sessions* [is that it] reminds us that images of difference never exist independently but are always narrated as juxtaposed with, or accompanied by, images of normality” (Malinowska, 2018, p. 372). An example of this opposition in the film is seen through the way Mark’s limited physical ability and lewdly articulated desires are contrasted with the normal sexual function and impulses of the able body, demarcating disabled sexuality as abhorrent. Similarly, in *Margarita with Straw* Laila’s atypical body that cannot be wholeheartedly loved by others is compared with the way all body types are accepted
within the conventional act of self-love, suggesting that the disabled seeking wholesome love from others is a sign of their sexual deviance.

Performance

All Bodies Dance Project’s latest show *Magic & Remembering* (Brand, 2019) is an example of a performing arts work that explores both bodily movement and identity making, which can both be facets of sexual expression.

The opening scene “re/integrate,” choreographed by romham pádraig gallacher, thoughtfully explores what it “mean[s] to bring trauma-shattered pieces of yourself back together to form something familiar yet unknown” (Brand, 2019). Three dancers take the stage and position themselves in a diagonal line, each of their unique movements creating a ripple effect within one another’s bodies. Slowly their interconnected movements yet seemingly separate bodies collide in a weave of limbs and mobility devices, where the intimacy in their embrace is striking. Bodies are fully suspended on top of each other, defying the limits of both gravity and imagination.

Founded in 2014 by Sarah Lapp, Mirae Rosner and Naomi Brand, All Bodies Dance project was created to establish a safe and inclusive space for people both with and without disabilities to discover their artistic potential, where difference is nothing but an asset.

The show finishes with “Inflect,” choreographed by Hermanie Taylor and Peggy Leung, which was also equally captivating. It addresses the question: “if you change the rules of movement, do you change the relationship between dancers?” (Brand, 2019). Leung, balanced precariously on a rolling pallet, intricately moves in tandem and opposition to Taylor in her manual wheelchair. Both dancers move together in a blur of anticipation and speed. By challenging the ambulatory rules of movement by both being

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3 running from June 1-3, 2019 at the ScotiaBank Dance Centre in Vancouver, BC
on wheels allows the dancers to rely on and playfully tease one another in a unique and breathtaking way.

*Magic & Remembering* was particularly striking due to its public display of disabled intimacy and bodily autonomy. It opened my eyes to the immense impact of performativity and the power of disabled cultural representation. My positive response to the performance helped pave the way for the activist lens I took in illuminating disabled perspectives of sexual expression in this essay.

According to Kuppers (2011) “disability culture is not a thing, but a process. Boundaries, norms, belongings: disability environments can suspend a whole slew of rules, try to undo the history of exclusions that many of its members have experienced when they have heard or felt ‘you shouldn’t be like this’” (p. 4). Performance art works focused around disability, such as *Magic & Remembering*, creates a space where rules and norms can be entirely suspended, allowing disability to take on new meanings. *Magic & Remembering* is particularly significant due to the way it reconceptualises traditionally upright patterns of movement and able-bodied expressions of intimacy. In this environment bodies are permitted to move at their own accord and to share intimacy on their own terms.

While “the management of the arts and disability sector is deeply political and deeply affected by wider societal norms that position disability and impairment as aberrant, and disabled people as incompetent and in need of help (Campbell 2009, 197)” (Austin et al., 2018, p. 254), performance art works can begin to challenge societal norms surrounding disability and encourage the acceptance of disabled bodies as they are.

By regarding the “body as a political symbol that is both coded and marked and invested in by power relations and is capable of disrupting, subverting, and expressing
ideas...[allows for] a range of possible meanings operating in each performance image” (Austin et al., 2018, p. 258) to emerge. Embedded in the diversity of abled and disabled performers collaborating with one another is the power of multiple interpretations.

**Documentary**

Yes, we fuck! (Centeno & De La Morena, 2015) is a documentary “that seeks not only to address sexuality in people with functional diversity, but also a project where people participate to communicate their ideas and, above all, question themselves” (“Yes, we fuck!,” n.d.). The film is split into six segments that profile a number of people with disabilities and their sexual partners, providing a detailed look into their vast array of sexual practices, ranging from group sex, sex with assistants, paying for sex, a female ejaculation workshop and a group therapy session on sexuality for people with developmental disabilities.

Documentaries give “audiences a snapshot of mediated but ostensibly real social actors, engaged in real life circumstances/events. The mediated nature of documentary film means that although social actors do not pretend to be fictional characters on screen, they do ‘play’ themselves and adapt their presentations in response to others” (Rozengarten & Brook, 2016, p. 4). Documentary films on sex and disability, such as Scarlet Road (Scott, 2011), which showcases an Australian sex worker and her disabled clients, and Inside the Controversial World of Medically Assisted Sex | Slutever (Vice, 2016), which documents the experiences of clients and practitioners of ‘medically assisted sex,’ can be critiqued for their “reiteration of discursive stereotypes of gender, sexuality, and disability...[that] unwittingly represents disabled people as undesirable and abject” (Rozengarten & Brook, 2016, p. 1). In addition, they can also be critiqued for portraying the disabled as “primarily if not exclusively heterosexual” (p. 12). Yes, we
Yes, we fuck! (Centeno & De La Morena, 2015) refreshingly includes several individuals who identify as queer and transgender in addition to a diversity of sexual “practices and desires [that] are neither governed nor limited to the couple, to heterosexuality or to reproduction” (García-Santesmases Fernández, 2017, p. 170).

According to Markotic “portrayals of the body – as able to outwardly represent inner turmoil or dis/order – is an ongoing narrative strategy of truth disclosure, especially in the cultural media of dramatic movies and documentary films” (Markotic, 2012, p. 8). While documentaries tend to adhere to an “underlying conventional view that corporeality does, still, verify” (p. 12), the portrayals of the body in Yes, we fuck! (Centeno & De La Morena, 2015) depart from representing inner turmoil as a means of truth by alternatively emphasizing bodies that find tranquility in and embrace their differences.

The opening scene of Yes, we fuck! (Centeno & De La Morena, 2015) features queer activist Urko who says that “We also have to take into account that desire is a construct, and that means: if you have always been told which things are desirable, and the bodies you are watching all the time in porn movies are very specific bodies, in the end, it’s gonna be a constructed desire, you end up desiring that, because you think that is the only desirable thing” (Centeno & De La Morena, 2015). Their observation of the limits of ‘constructed desire’ highlights the way in which “There is nothing inherently frightening, pitiable, or undesirable about disabled people. There is no substance to these stereotyped illusions, rather they are phantoms/illusions produced by discursive iterations” (Rozengarten & Brook, 2016, p. 16). The discursive choices in Yes, we fuck! (Centeno & De La Morena, 2015) of profiling people with diverse sexual identities and their preferences illuminates multiple ways in which the disabled are desired and achieve pleasure.
Brylla and Hughes argue that “documentary percepts mediate the highly specific worlds of dis/abling experiences and thereby unfold the possibility to feel, perceive, think and engage differently with dis/abilities and related emerging issues” (Brylla & Hughes, 2017, p. vi). Yes, we fuck! (Centeno & De La Morena, 2015) reconceptualises the deviance that is often attributed to sex and disability by showcasing the disabled body as desirable, through its portrayals of the “queer-crip encounter, [where] all corporealities are welcome. The boundaries between bodies diffuse and disability is no longer a variable of differentiation, and neither is sex” (García-Santesmases Fernández, 2017, p. 163). Within the film people with disabilities having sex are seen as normal, where all bodies are considered equal.

Documentary film provides visibility to lived experiences of disabled sexual expression that have the power to reimagine disability as both pleasurable and desirable. Real-life representations of sex and disability go a long way towards challenging preconceived notions of disabled sexual deviance.

**Sci-fi and reimagining disability**

The way in which disabled sexuality is represented in opposition to normality is indicative of the need to reimagine disabled sexuality beyond the limits of normalcy. A worthwhile starting place in which to reconceptualise disabled sexuality is within science fiction. According to Adams (2015) “the images and narratives present in science fiction can defy norms” (p. 2), making the genre a worthy site of analysis for reimagining disabled sexuality. She also articulates how “science fiction stories are not just fantastical imaginings, they are stories about our political systems and anxieties about new technologies, social change, race, gender, class, and religious conflict” (p. 2). Stories of science fiction are also analogous to issues surrounding disability. While cultural critiques of disability “have developed the subversive potential of a disability
culture [and their texts] as a reactionary transgressive response to these negative images” (Peters, 2006, p. 415), popular science fiction films such as The Shape of Water (del Toro, 2017) and Pulse (Cruz-Martin, 2017) have also attempted to combat negative images of disabled sexuality on screen.

*The Shape of Water* is an Academy Award-winning romantic fantasy film about a mute woman named Elisa who falls in love with a humanoid amphibian whom she rescues from a government facility where he is being held captive. The film represents Elisa as a meek and unintelligent woman who is sexually repressed, seen through the way she is shown masturbating, in order to magnify her similarities with the amphibian man and the significance of their blooming relationship. To add to their similarities, Elisa has unexplained scars on her neck to indicate damage to her voice-box, which leaves her mute, whereas the amphibian man has gills. When they are saying their goodbyes at the canal, where he is set to return to the ocean they are shot at by his captors, before he escapes with the injured Elisa into the ocean. Here he uses his healing powers, seen earlier in the film, to heal them both and to turn her neck scars into gills. The film ends as they embrace and the narrator says that they lived happily ever after. The discourse of disabled sexual deviance is extended within the film due to the way it cements the deviant nature of disabled sexual expression by presenting it in tandem with and empowered by the supernatural, as well as only having the chance at being tolerated in an otherworld.

*Pulse* (Cruz-Martin, 2017) is an Australian science fiction drama, set in an unspecified future, where a disabled gay man named Olly chooses to become a woman via a full body transplant (Canavero, 2013) so that he can transcend his disability to woo his male best friend Luke into falling in love with him. While the film tries to grapple with some of the identity struggles of being gay and disabled, based on the producer and lead actor Daniel Monks’ real life experiences of them, it problematically does so at the
expense of the lived experiences of transgender people, by presenting switching
genders and swapping bodies as a means of duping others into seeing them as worthy
of love and as a way of transcending the perils of disabled relationship building. The film
harmfully equates disability with being unlovable, which perpetuates sexuality and
disability as being highly stigmatized and negative.

Similarly to *Pulse* (Cruz-Martin, 2017), in James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009)\(^4\), its
main protagonist James Sully, a paraplegic former marine, also abandons his disabled
body by occupying an avatar that was meant for his deceased able-bodied brother, due
to his compatible DNA so that he can help to colonize the planet Pandora. It offers a
negative representation of disability and sexuality due to the way he eventually falls in
love with a female Na’vi, a humanoid species on Pandora, in large part due to his
simulated physical prowess, which his disabled body lacks in real life. His avatar body is
only deemed worthy because of its ableness.

While both *The Shape of Water* and *Pulse* had the potential to defy norms of
disabled sexual expression within the genre of science fiction, due to the way their
narratives nullify disabled sexual subjectivity through cure and bodily escape,
respectively, upholds the abominable quality given to disabled sexual expression.
Disabled sexual deviance is prevalent across cinematic genres due to the way disabled
sexuality continues to be represented in opposition to the normal within film more
generally. The pervasive atypical representations of disabled sexuality have the best
opportunity of being transcended through disabled understandings of the body that
accept both their complexity and ambiguity.

The inexactness of the disabled body can be embraced through Eli Clare’s
(2017) notion of “brilliant imperfection” that offers “a way of knowing, understanding, and
living with disability and chronic illness…[which] is rooted in the nonnegotiable value of

\(^4\) I do not analyze *Avatar* more extensively due to its minor depiction of disability
body-mind difference. It resists the pressures of normal and abnormal. It defies the easy splitting of natural from unnatural. It has emerged from collective understandings and stubborn survivals" (p. xvii). The brilliant imperfection of the disabled body champions the dynamic quality of interpretations of disability and accepts their indefinability.

Cinematic representations of disabled sexuality would be more expansive and inclusive of experiences of disabled sexual expression if they were to honour the brilliant imperfection of disabled bodies by portraying their sexual intricacies as they are. Mark and Laila could have been portrayed in their brilliant imperfection in The Sessions and Margarita with a Straw respectively by focusing on how they were initially left desiring to feel loved after their sexual encounters. Due to the way these mainstream films on sex and disability conclude in as socially satisfying a resolution as possible to entertain their audiences they minimize the diversity of disabled sexual experience, including heartbreak and unrequited love. Representing the brilliant imperfection of disabled sexual subjects would offer a wider range of experiences of disabled sexual expression that would encourage the acceptance of their sexuality as boundless, rather than as abnormal and reprehensible.

Beyond challenging the limits of representation, a more vigorous critique of how disability is constructed societally, from the disabled perspective, is needed in order to begin to deconstruct the discourse of disabled sexual deviance. A means of re-evaluating how disability operates as a system of oppression can be achieved through A.J. Withers’ (2013) “radical model of disability [that] re-embeds disability with impairment, arguing that the division is more harmful than useful and that disability (including impairment) is socially constructed… It also demands the creation of radical ideas of accessibility (building on an analysis of interlocking oppression) that aren’t simply about ramps, but also interdependence, inclusion and justice” (p. 8). The radical model of disability offers a much-needed alternative to the outdated medical and social
models by emphasizing how impairment is also affected socially and should not be erased from the experience of disability. The radical model’s focus on interlocking oppression ensures that disability is not problematically reduced to one variable and recognizes how disability is interconnected with other marginalized identities.

The radical model of disability is particularly relevant to this discussion of combatting the discourse of disabled sexual deviance through film due to the way that disabled sexual expression is inextricably linked with the social affect on impairment and accelerated by their degrees of interlocking oppression. How the manifestation of one’s disability is impacted socially is briefly seen in *The Sessions* where Mark internalizes his perceived sexual inferiority to the point that he believes he is not deserving of sex. The social affects surrounding disablement are strongly felt by disabled sexual subjects and the entirety of *The Sessions* could be focused on unpacking this specific experience and the psychological harm that it can cause. Additionally, interlocking oppression is loosely touched on in *Margarita with a Straw* when we see how Laila and Khanum, two woman of color, attend a rally protesting police brutality and experience an increased degree of displacement and violence due to their physical disabilities. While the film pays significant attention to the intertwined oppression of being LGBTQ2+ and disabled, it would be more representationally expansive if it deliberately addressed their intersections with race as well.

**Conclusion: The Power of Disabled Diversity**

Films and performances provide a space for meaning-making to take place and the representations within them offer a glimpse of how people make sense of the world around them. From film we can glean valuable insight into how social relations are understood and constructed, such as those surrounding sexuality and disability. Due to the visibility of film, how social relations are constructed within them are particularly
important given that they can delimit how body and identity markers are understood at a societal level. A multi-media analysis of sexuality and disability in dramatic, documentary and science-fiction film, in addition to live performance, can illuminate how sexuality and disability are understood both socially and culturally, and how representations of them can be altered to accommodate the diversity of the disabled sexual mosaic.

The threats posed against atypical bodies throughout history, from the antique period through carnivals and freak shows, and the extermination of disabled sexual subjects under eugenics have generated a pervasive discourse of disabled sexual deviance. Disabled sexual subjects continue to be read as deviant today due to these historical legacies and cinematic representations largely extend the discourse of sexual deviance by portraying disabled sexual expression in opposition to the norm.

While sexuality and disability are both regarded as existing on a spectrum, they are generally misinterpreted as being in opposition to one another. Sexuality is often positioned in polarizing ways, where it is either regarded as normal or deviant. The rigidity of understandings of sexuality and disability and the tension between the two can be challenged through disabled interpretations of either subject that contain a large degree of fluidity. By always existing on the periphery, disabled people have embraced a diverse sexual culture built on the plethora of their lived experiences. If cinematic representations of disabled sexuality could substitute their rigidity within the limits of the discourse of disabled sexual deviance for the sexual ambiguity of the disabled community they would have the potential to challenge static notions of sex and disability.

Texts on disability and sexuality have immense cultural value due to the way they influence how disability and sexuality are understood within social groups. Due to the way disability and sexuality are primarily understood as being atypical has a bearing on how they are represented almost exclusively in terms of deviance. By departing from discourses of sexual deviance, through the representation of the disabled community's
embrace of their sexual ambiguity within film offers an opportunity to radically reconceptualise sexuality and disability.

While my research provides much needed scholarship that investigates both sexuality and disability in tandem, it also has evident limitations that are worth discussing. While I have analyzed a number of recent dramatic and science-fiction films, my investigation of documentary film and live performance is sparse given the limited representation on the subject. I could further my analysis by analyzing more in depth the documentary *Scarlet Road* (Scott, 2011) that explores the relationships that sex worker Rachel Wotton forms with her disabled clients and performances by Sins Invalid, “a performance project that incubates and celebrates artists with disabilities, centralizing artists of color and queer and gender-variant artists as communities who have been historically marginalized” (“Our Mission | About Us | Sins Invalid,” n.d.).

Many of the cinematic texts I have called into question are mainstream films created for able-bodied audiences. Future research could complicate the analysis of the meaning of sexuality and disability by analysing documentary and performance on the subject, which are primarily for audiences with disabilities.

This research has confirmed for me the importance of meaning making surrounding sexuality and disability both socially and culturally. I have reinvigorated my interest in the emancipatory nature of Disability Studies. While I remain interested in analysing mainstream cinematic texts on sexuality and disability, I believe the greatest potential for change lies in the hands of people with disabilities and within our cultural texts. I can only imagine where my research would have taken me if I began with this in mind.
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