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DISABLING SEX

Notes for a Crip Theory of Sexuality

Robert McRuer

The time has come to think about disability.

Of course, “Thinking Disability” was not, on the surface at least, what Gayle Rubin had in mind when she penned the famous opening lines of her 1984 essay “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality.”¹ And, even as I perform a crip appropriation of those lines, I am aware that, for many, sex and disability at times seem not so much intersectional as incongruous: “What exactly *do* you do?” is about as frequent a question for disabled people, in relation to sex, as it historically has been for many queers. The motivation behind the question, however, has usually been different. Although stereotypes of the oversexed disabled person engaged in unspeakable acts do exist, disabled people are more commonly positioned as asexual—incapable of or uninterested in sex. Speaking to such expectations, the disability activist Anne Finger wrote more than a decade ago, in an assertion now well known in the disability rights movement, “Sexuality is often the source of our deepest oppression; it is also often the source of our deepest pain. It’s easier to talk about and formulate strategies for changing discrimination in employment, education, and housing than it is to talk about our exclusion from sexuality and reproduction.”²

But what if disability were sexy? And what if disabled people were understood to be both subjects and objects of a multiplicity of erotic desires and practices, both within and outside the parameters of heteronormative sexuality?³ With such attitudes and questions in the background, I want to play with the title of this brief essay—“Disabling Sex”—stretching it to signify in a couple of different ways. I do that partly by linking “Thinking Sex” to another text from the same year that it has, without a doubt, never been linked to before. Deborah A. Stone’s 1984 book *The Disabled State* is largely a history of varied welfare state policies (from Britain, Germany, and the United States).⁴ It is chock-full of facts and statis-

tics. It mainly examines the push for restriction or expansion of various programs, and it is not particularly optimistic (given how consistently those programs collapse or fail). It is often very dry, even if, I argue, it contains some stunning arguments that the interdisciplinary field of disability studies, or any field, might still attend to. Hence one thing I am doing with my title, “Disabling Sex,” is bringing the disabled state to bear on thinking sex. And this essay attempts to make the most of the potential incongruity—if it is not *entirely* unthinkable that a lover might say “what’s that juicy opening line from Rubin’s “Thinking Sex?”” it is a bit harder to imagine “mmm, talk dirty to me, read me a few lines on the emergence of SSDI and worker’s compensation from Stone’s *Disabled State*.”

Crippling Sex

Before staging a quick, promiscuous encounter between the two 1984 texts, however, I should emphasize that Rubin’s famous article is, in fact, already saturated with disability in at least three ways. First, as Abby L. Wilkerson has suggested, Rubin’s “charmed circle of sex” marks an able-bodied/disabled divide, even according to Rubin’s own terms, since the location she identifies as “the outer limits” is where many crips end up.⁵ Here, for instance, are some of Rubin’s own terms: unnatural, nonprocreative, commercial, in groups, casual, cross-generational, with manufactured objects. Wilkerson goes on to consider “Hermaphrodites With Attitude . . . men with breasts, ‘chicks with dicks,’ anyone who is HIV-positive or schizophrenic or uses a wheelchair” and demonstrates that the project of thinking about particular bodies and practices populating the “outer limits” could be infinitely extended.⁶ To add to Wilkerson’s reflections on sexualized practices outside the charmed circle (and some of these are outer limits even for many inside disability communities): devoteeism; fetishizing of the accoutrements of deafness (or, for that matter, deaf wannabes); self-demand amputation; barebacking; hospital scenes (whether Bob Flanagan’s very public ones or the ones staged by any ordinary person who wants to get off in a hospital gown during a hospital stay); potentially surveilled sex between people with cognitive disabilities in group homes; sex surrogacy (more about that later); or (to specify some of Rubin’s “manufactured objects”) sex involving crutches, oxygen masks, or prosthetic body parts. Recognizing his own new position outside the “charmed circle,” one contributor to the Lammy Award—winning anthology *Queer Crips* takes pride and pleasure in his location there, noting that he was a pretty average straight guy until his accident, after which he begins using a chair, thinks in expansive ways about what he might do with his body, becomes gay, and is open to just about

anything kinky.⁷ Jump to the *center* of Rubin's charmed circle, conversely, and you have what Wilkerson calls "normate sex," which—following Erving Goffman—is probably only possible for one or two people; Goffman identifies this imagined normate as "a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports."⁸

Second, the "sex panics" Rubin details are invariably about disability somehow. The disturbance, disorder, and danger that Michel Foucault talks about in his lectures on the emergence of the abnormal individual are specifically positioned as threats to "public hygiene" and health, and certainly the "increasingly decomposed, ravaged, skeletal, and diaphanous physiognomy of the exhausted young masturbator" plays a key role in the story he has to tell, as masturbation is etiologically connected to everything from blindness to insanity.⁹ And, of course, even as Rubin was writing in the mid-1980s, we were learning that "now, no one is safe" (to quote the famous *Life* magazine cover): queers, addicts, and sex workers out of control would infect everyone (and essentially kill them, but of course first comes significant disability).¹⁰ Rubin was both aware of what was coming in relation to AIDS and savvy enough to link the coming panic to earlier historical moments that were likewise simultaneously about both panic over sex and horror at what might happen to the body. In her discussion of AIDS, she writes, "A century ago, attempts to control syphilis led to the passage of the Contagious Diseases Acts in England. The Acts were based on erroneous medical theories and did nothing to halt the spread of the disease. But they did make life miserable for the hundreds of women who were incarcerated, subjected to forcible vaginal examination, and stigmatized for life as prostitutes."¹¹

Third, Rubin's "concept of benign sexual variation" only really works if we actually populate and extend it with bodies—bodies that are non-able-bodied, or rather bodies (and minds) that are simply off the grid of the historical able-bodied/disabled binary (normate sex may be founded on compulsory able-bodiedness, but that seems to me the first thing that goes out the window when we theorize and put into practice benign sexual variation). This point is implicit in what Rubin initially says about the concept—"variation is a fundamental property of all life, from the simplest biological organisms to the most complex human social formations"—and explicit in a range of queer bodily and sexual practices over the past few decades, from the ways that various lesbian feminist communities (including attendees at the 1982 Barnard conference that generated Rubin's essay) worked to value, include, or eroticize a range of nonnormative bodies (think, for instance, of Audre Lorde's imagined army of one-breasted women) to gay male

attempts to have promiscuity in an epidemic, insisting that all of us are living with HIV and figuring out what kinds of pleasures might be shaped by taking that fact into account.¹² In these varied queer contexts, “disabling sex” signifies processes that are much more challenging, disruptive, resistant, and even, well, sexy.¹³

Around 1984

So what might any of this have to do with Stone’s *Disabled State*? Rubin’s project in “Thinking Sex” involved, at least partly, linking emergent forms of sexual hierarchization to the consolidation of industrial capitalism and paralleling resistance to that hierarchization to struggles around and against the bourgeois mode of production. Stone, as well, was concerned with how newly configured capitalist states were sorting bodies and behaviors into dominant and subordinated categories. At the same time that Rubin was insisting that “like the capitalist organization of labor and its distributions of rewards and powers, the modern sexual system has been the object of political struggle since it emerged and as it has evolved,” Stone too was reflecting on distributions of rewards and powers and on how structures of inequality rigidified in and through that distribution.¹⁴

The trajectory of Stone’s analysis, however, is slightly different from Rubin’s. Stone is certainly concerned with the subordination of disabled people and with the injustices that attend the disabled state. Yet she approaches these questions through a textured consideration of how modern states have in effect *utilized* disability. Stone examines what she calls “the distributive dilemma” in modernity and places the social construction of disability at the absolute center of the political struggle to define a given society: in modernity, according to Stone, “we ask [disability] to resolve the issue of distributive justice.”¹⁵ A breathtaking pronouncement, really, and a task that Stone acknowledges disability is certainly not up to, not least given the contradictory (and unjust) capitalist context from which this demand emerges. Capitalism first establishes a system where we are “free” to sell our labor power and not particularly free to do anything else and *then* has to manage those subjects who cannot or will not participate in that compulsory organization of labor. Two distributive systems, one work-based and one need-based, of necessity arise, and Stone grapples with the wide range of issues generated by these conditions: first, the various rationales that emerge to locate people in one category or the other; second, the “validating devices” that emerge to accompany those rationales, determining “objectively” which system, work- or need-based, should be operative for a given person (the very fraught and incoherent notion of a “clinical concept of disability”—that is, a disabled state

that can be observed and noted by authorities—is invented for this purpose); and, finally and perhaps most impossibly, the ideological maneuvering that kicks into gear—capitalist societies must somehow “maintain the dominance,” Stone argues, of the primary, work-based distributive system, even if and as that system is really quite onerous to most people.¹⁶ “Disability,” as a putatively measurable social construction, is supposed to resolve all this.

Which is where one of Stone’s other major contributions comes in, a contribution that is as simple and stunning as her pronouncement that disability is called on to resolve the question of distributive justice in modernity. Of necessity, given the state of affairs Stone describes, in *The Disabled State* (and the disabled state), disability emerges discursively as a *privileged* identity, which is why there is so much anxiety and suspicion around the disabled “category” and who gets to qualify for it. I find this 1984 insight incredible for many reasons, not least that twenty-five years later, if you surveyed the vast majority of disability studies 101 syllabi (including my own), stigma and exclusion would likely be the focus of a large portion of the introductory material. Like the deviants and perverts outside Rubin’s charmed circle, disabled people are often positioned in disability studies as stigmatized (and of course Goffman himself links sexuality and disability, and his *Stigma* often shows up on one of the very first days of the imagined courses I just evoked—indeed, selections from *Stigma* are in fact the only pre-1970 readings included in *The Disability Studies Reader*).¹⁷

I am certainly not arguing against understanding disabled people as stigmatized in contemporary societies, and neither is Stone: the “privileging” that she theorizes is itself, after all, clearly a form of subordination and stigmatization dependent on what Paul K. Longmore terms “ceremonies of social degradation.”¹⁸ The privilege of belonging to the disabled category Stone describes is rooted in stigma because the need-based system has already been positioned ideologically by the modern state as inferior to the work-based system (or, put differently, has been invented by the modern state to vouchsafe the superiority of the work-based system). I am, however, considering how understanding or overemphasizing stigma as isolation or social exclusion may obscure Stone’s quite nuanced arguments about privilege. I do not think it *wholly* suffices, especially in our own historical moment, to account for Stone’s thesis by saying that disability is stigmatized socially and culturally and “privileged” only in relation to the institutions invested in measuring disability to resolve the problem of distributive justice. That particular distinction between where disability is privileged and where it is stigmatized is true, to a large extent, but does not *exhaust* her points—or rather, potentially dilutes them and thereby makes it possible to avoid some more difficult or interest-

ing questions. In 1984, when it was (according to his campaign advertisements) “morning again” in Ronald Reagan’s America, one could argue—taking seriously Stone’s linkage of disability and privilege—that Stone facilitates a critique of an emergent neoliberalism and attends to the contradictions generated by the necessary simultaneity of exclusion and incorporation (from, but also into, the nation and the state) in ways that queer studies will not fully get around to theorizing until *A Queer Mother for the Nation*, *Terrorist Assemblages*, *The Twilight of Equality*, the homonormativity issue of the *Radical History Review*, and—indeed—*The Straight State*.¹⁹ There is perhaps some of this going on in Rubin’s “Thinking Sex,” but its explicit focus on the persecution and oppression of nonnormative sexuality (a focus that was, at the time, of course, absolutely crucial) is much more obvious than emergent, neoliberal incorporations.

Crippling the State

For disability studies, even as the field sustains a focus on stigma and exclusion, it is important to keep in view Stone’s oft-forgotten points about the centrality of privilege and incorporation. For queer studies, it is important to attend to how a theory of uneven biopolitical incorporation—the incorporation of some bodies (but not others) into the state—has been part of disability studies for as long as we have had Rubin’s notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality. Queer studies regularly demonstrates, at this point if not in 1984, how both the state and the cultural imagination can deploy sex and sexuality to mask exploitation or oppression in other locations. We are, in other words, used to “thinking sex” in these ways. My intent in conclusion is to push us toward similar ways of “thinking sex and disability” together.

I attempt to exemplify thinking sex and disability in our moment via a brief concluding story of sex surrogacy and the Netherlands (and of course it’s much easier to tell the story of sex surrogacy via the Netherlands than it is via the United States—or most other places, for that matter). “Sex surrogacy,” where a sex worker either works directly with a disabled person or facilitates that person’s sexual interaction with a third party, is a very contested term. I use it here simply to tell this particular story, and I recognize that the language for the processes I discuss is currently in flux.²⁰

In 2001 a man named Hennie van den Wittenboer won a seven-year legal fight to get help from the social services department in Tilburg. The Dutch Council in Tilburg agreed to pay for van den Wittenboer to have sex once a month with a sex worker. Van den Wittenboer is disabled and uses a wheelchair and—in a story

taken up by Dutch television and newspapers—reported needing less medication and feeling less stress once the state-funded sex surrogacy was in place. Initially, during his legal battle, van den Wittenboer said, “[the council] said sex wasn’t part of the primary needs of a human being.” “Now,” he said in 2001, “there is a lady coming once a month, and I feel much better.”²¹ Since then, the Dutch government has more consistently codified these services, paying for hetero- and homosexual sexual services for mentally and physically disabled citizens, and, according to Selina Bonnie, “people with significant impairments” have been traveling to the Netherlands “to access sex services, which have been established by the state specifically for disabled people.”²² Although the legal battle prior to 2001 already suggests that the policy was not uncontroversial, it would seem that since then it has both become *somewhat* less so and partly, for some in the Netherlands (and elsewhere, in thought *about* the Netherlands), wrapped up in a national sense of who “we” are: nonplussed about sex, attentive to the health needs of “our” citizens, different from countries that are neither of those, and so forth. Even with the sexualized twist, this Dutch situation fits with one of Stone’s other arguments, that national attempts to resolve questions of distributive justice around and through disability get wrapped up almost immediately in national self-definition.²³

At least two things are interesting to me as disability and sex come together around the state. First, I am interested in how sexualized discourses of “openness” might currently and paradoxically function normatively in the Netherlands (and elsewhere), especially in the wake of Pim Fortuyn’s rise to prominence a decade ago. Fortuyn was an openly gay politician running for parliament as a member of the right-wing, anti-immigrant *Leefbaar Nederland* Party, when he was assassinated by an animal rights activist in 2002. What came to the fore during Fortuyn’s campaign (and in some ways after the assassination as well) was how tolerance of sexual diversity and minoritized gay identities could actually be deployed to facilitate xenophobia and Islamophobia. I am not by any means equating the stories of Pim Fortuyn and Hennie van den Wittenboer; instead, I am making a point about dangers that can potentially circulate around sexual identity *or* disability or sexual identity *and* disability: “yes that’s who we are as a people” or even “yes that’s who we are sexually” and “look to the fairness with which we treat our minoritized citizenry” can coexist with what Jasbir Puar has so effectively analyzed as the targeting of *other* populations for quarantine and death. Puar calls the “securitization and valorization” of certain queer subjects in the contemporary moment “homonationalism” and contends that such securitization is intimately connected to how other subjects (what she calls “terrorist corporealities”) are marked as excessive and essentially targeted for death or elimination.²⁴

Partly thanks to Puar's important study, we are starting to get used to making these points in queer studies but not so much, I would say, in disability studies, even if Stone's arguments authorized us to do so, at a time when a nascent queer studies really was not. A crip theory of sexuality, then, would insist on thinking seriously about van den Wittenboer's rights and pleasures while being wary of how those *might* get discursively positioned by and around the state. It would, additionally, to use van den Wittenboer's own words, want the sensation of "feeling much better" (in all its resonances) to be autonomous from one's citizen-status (van den Wittenboer seems to have simply evoked the "needs of a human being" that, in his deployment, did not seem to be a category particularly tied to citizen-status). Van den Wittenboer did not necessarily position this as queer or crip theory on the ground, but there is no reason not to.

Second, and this may be why we still have such trouble in disability studies with this kind of analysis around privileged identities, obviously the potential use of disability and sex to shore up who "we" are can and will coexist with plenty of "panic" (to invoke Rubin again), plenty of residual or even dominant discourses that still position disability and desire at odds or, put differently, disability as undesirable: debates in the Netherlands about physician-assisted suicide and, for some, a certain common sense that of course severe disability is cause enough for a state-sponsored exit, coexisted and coexist with the more emergent discourses I have been tracing.²⁵

So, to end by repeating one of the questions I identified at the beginning: what if disability were sexy? Of course it already is: crip cultures are as hot and sexy, fierce and happening as queer cultures at their best (and these cultures obviously overlap already and should overlap more). But a crip theory of sexuality is simultaneously hip to how its sexiness might get used, or hip to how disability has already been used in so many problematic ways by the modern state. The sexy queer crip performer Greg Walloch can lead me to a conclusion here. In the 2001 performance video *Fuck the Disabled*, Walloch speaks of perusing bookstore shelves and coming across a Louise Hay book that identifies cerebral palsy as "brought to this earth to heal the family with one sweeping gesture of love." After a pause and deadpan look up at his audience, Walloch continues rapidly, "brought to the earth with one sweeping gesture of love . . . you know, I don't really want that job!"²⁶ A crip theory of sexuality, thinking and rethinking sex and seeking to feel much better, would push for other sensations, other connections, but would always be attuned to the impossible work that disability has been asked to perform—to resolve questions of distributive justice (with one sweeping gesture of love?) while

masking the contradictions inherent in the system that generated those questions of justice in the first place.

Notes

1. Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 267–319.
2. Anne Finger, "Forbidden Fruit," *New Internationalist* no. 233 (1992): 9.
3. I am taking these two questions, as well as the notion of incongruity that I am considering in these opening paragraphs, from Anna Mollow's and my introduction to the anthology *Sex and Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming).
4. Deborah A. Stone, *The Disabled State* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984).
5. Abby L. Wilkerson, "Normate Sex and Its Discontents: Intersex, Transgender, and Sexually Based Disability," in McRuer and Mollow, *Sex and Disability*.
6. Despite Wilkerson's generative use of Rubin's "charmed circle" and "outer limits," she is elsewhere critical of how Rubin's theoretical move separates sexual hierarchies from other social hierarchies. See Abby L. Wilkerson, "Disability, Sex Radicalism, and Political Agency," *National Women's Studies Association Journal* 14 (2002): 33–57.
7. Alex Sendham, "Beginner's Sex," in *Queer Crips: Disabled Gay Men and Their Stories*, ed. Bob Guter and John R. Killacky (New York: Harrington Park, 2004), 191–97.
8. Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 128.
9. Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974–1975*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2003), 235.
10. "Now No One Is Safe from AIDS," *Life Magazine*, July 1985.
11. Rubin, "Thinking Sex," 299.
12. Rubin, "Thinking Sex," 283.
13. See Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1980); and Douglas Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 237–71.
14. Rubin, "Thinking Sex," 309.
15. Stone, *Disabled State*, 13.
16. Stone, *Disabled State*, 21, 90.
17. Lennard J. Davis, ed., *The Disability Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
18. Paul K. Longmore, *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 240.

19. Licia Fiol-Matta, *A Queer Mother for the Nation: The State and Gabriela Mistral* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 2003); Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Kevin P. Murphy, Jason Ruiz, and David Serlin, eds., "Queer Futures: The Homonormativity Issue," special issue, *Radical History Review* (2008); Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).
20. For a now-classic first-person account of his own experiences with sex surrogates in San Francisco in the 1980s, see Mark O'Brien, "On Seeing a Sex Surrogate," *Sun*, May 1990, www.pacificnews.org/marko/sex-surrogate.html.
21. Keith Chalkley, "What a Pleasure," *Dispatchonline*, November 10, 2001, www.dispatch.co.za/2001/11/10/foreign/BWORLD.HTM. The story was reported in the Dutch newspaper *Brabants Dagblad* and then circulated globally in English via "breaking news" Internet sites, largely of two sorts: blogs, sites, and chat forums focused on disability access issues and sensationalizing sites highlighting news of the (supposedly) humorous or bizarre.
22. Selina Bonnie, "Disabled People, Disability, and Sexuality," in *Disabling Barriers, Enabling Environments*, 2nd ed., ed. John Swain et al. (London: Sage, 2004), 129. In the Netherlands, these issues actually predate van den Wittenboer's legal battle, and an organization called Selective Human Relations has offered subsidized sexual assistance for twenty years. See Mutsuko Murakami, "The Right to Sex," *South China Morning Post*, September 11, 2004, 15; Helen McNutt, "Hidden Pleasures," *Guardian*, October 13, 2004, 2; Barbara Smit, "State to Pay for Sex Visits to Disabled Man," *Irish Times*, August 26, 1992, 7.
23. This national self-definition is a discursive formation that then travels beyond the borders of the Netherlands. The cultural work of this discursive formation does not necessarily translate into more sexual freedom on the ground, and, indeed, according to Gert Hekma, the widely accepted idea of Dutch sexual openness has actually inhibited queer radicalism at the turn of the twenty-first century. See Gert Hekma, "Queer: The Dutch Case," *GLQ* 10 (2004): 276–80.
24. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 3. Puar herself discusses the Fortuyn story and considers briefly some of the ways in which the Netherlands exemplifies the larger processes she is theorizing (19–21).
25. In the United States in 2009, as I was completing this essay, it seems to me that the processes I am sketching remain operative, even though I have chosen in the body of my text to "think disability" (or sex and disability) via another state. The United States remains a location where disabled people's lives are overwhelmingly positioned as undesirable and often, through the corporate (and extremely punitive) insurance-

based health care system, as dispensable. As health care debates raged in the United States during 2009, however (largely over proposals that would clearly not benefit the vast majority of people living with impairment or illness in the United States), certain key disabled figures were brought forward discursively to shore up who Americans as a people are or should be—most notably, Trig Palin, the son of former Alaska governor Sarah Palin, who was used in some of his mother’s speeches as a disabled American who would have to stand before “death panels” deciding whether he would live or die if the insurance-based system were to be reformed. Others, sometimes speaking for themselves and sometimes used as examples by family members, occupied similar positions at so-called town hall meetings around the country. My argument is that this particular biopolitical use of disability identity is relatively new and fundamentally antidisabled.

26. Greg Walloch, *Fuck the Disabled*, dir. Eli Kabillio, New York: Mad Dog Films, 2001.