



Transforming Cultures of (Un)Desirability: Creating Cultures of Resistance.

Loree Erickson

ABSTRACT: One of the most insidious and comprehensive ways to marginalize people is to make them question their loveability, their desirability, their collective worth, and establish social organization that reinforces and perpetuates these systemic harms; while internalizing dominance and personalizing oppression. This process is what I am referring to when I say cultures of undesirability. Cultures of undesirability involve the narrowing of dominant western cultural imaginary so that marginalized others come to be so often understood and constructed as both “less than” and “too much,” if we are understood as persons at all. As strong as cultures of undesirability are, our resistance is stronger. Queercrip porn, an emerging form of sexual storytelling, shares and fosters queercrip knowledges, pleasures and imaginings. In this essay, I want to share how queercrip porn highlights the multitude of ways marginalized communities navigate and transform cultures of undesirability, acts as a method for fostering resiliency through building and nurturing our collective worth; and finally, how queercrip porn interrupts dominant cultural and structural ways of thinking, being and organizing that contribute to sexual marginalization and cultures of undesirability.

KEYWORDS: queercrip porn; disability; cultures of un/desirability; resistance and resilience.

Cultures of Undesirability

I want to start off with a poem that Masti Khor, a Toronto-based queer brown



femme crip burlesque artist used in a recent phenomenal performance exploring ritual and self-love. I am only using part of it.

The bud stands for all things, even for those things that don't flower, for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing; though sometimes it is necessary to retrace a thing its loveliness, to put a hand on its brow of the flower and retell it in words and in touch it is lovely until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing (Kinnell, 2001, 94).

Masti Khor and I talk a lot about undoing cultures of undesirability. When I speak or hear the words of this poem I am in my bedroom, she is lying in my bed, I am sitting near her. We hold hands as hours are filled with so much shared laughing, crying and raging. Holding hands in and through the lovely parts and the scary parts. Retelling in words and in touch our collective loveliness.

One of the main reasons I started doing this work was because one of the earliest truths I ever learned was that no one would ever want me as a partner because of my disability. This message, while often not stated directly, was echoed and confirmed everywhere around me. While my experience is specific it is not unique; many disabled activists speak to the experience of feeling unwanted as a partner and excluded from romantic and sexual cultures (Siebers, 2008). Stacy Milbern writes,

in fact, this has been my whole life — a string of experiences where I am the friend people are secretly very emotionally intimate with, but the one who is not invited to parties, the friend the person is conflicted about loving ... It has been an endless struggle to prove and remember worth in a culture that is relentless in its telling of the wrongness of our bodies (2011, np).

We¹ start learning the wrongness of bodies very early on. I'm sure everyone reading this paper learned these lessons. What are the lessons you have learned about bodies/your body/how bodies relate? I am still unlearning these lessons of wrongness. It is my go to. It doesn't help that I haven't been asked out on a date in two years. I want to share with you in this space, some of the lessons that I have learned about the supposed wrongness of my body. I would also like to share some of the

lessons I have learned from my wheelchair using body, a body that needs, and is marked by asymmetric curves. These lessons are about resistance and other ways of being in the world. What complex and contradictory lessons is your body teaching you?

From our lived experiences we know that marginalized people are positioned outside the terms of desirability. This often happens through a discourse in which marginalization is seen as the result of isolated personal inferiority rather than a social harm (Waxman, 1994). The frame of personal inferiority, a key component of the medical, charity and eugenic models of disability, perpetuates narratives of asexuality and victimization that dominate mainstream discourses surrounding sexuality and disability (Tepper, 2000). So called “truths” about disabled people² are informed by a long history of medical, charity and eugenic models of disability which take up disability, and particular bodies and/or minds, as being in a state of biomedical malfunction (which historically and currently includes many different forms of marginalization) (Withers, 2012). This understanding constructs our needs, lives and desires as outside normativity and therefore unintelligible. According to this hegemonic story, marginalized people will certainly lead a life full of tragedy and/or pathology. We, who are deemed as too little and too much, are also treated as threats and burdens to those around us as well as to the state. We are consistently reminded that there is something wrong with *us*, not the systems of social organization that simultaneously enable some and rule out others (Siebers, 2008). These practices of pathologizing profoundly impact individual bodies, identities, experiences and desires; they also contribute to the creation of categories of difference and distinctions occurring along complex and contradictory points of privilege and marginalization. These dominant western cultural imaginings are part of the institutional and performative cultures of undesirability. The term cultures of undesirability emerges from queercrip, people of color and activist communities to name the multitude of ways that systemic harm manifests in our lived experiences such as sexual oppression, violence, both interpersonal and systemic, and exclusion from community (Erickson, 2010; Mingus, 2011; Gud’buy t’Jane, 2011; and Ndopu, 2012).

We encounter and navigate cultures of undesirability everywhere, every time we leave our home, and for many of us even in our homes (if we have secure housing) we are surrounded by understandings of disability, gender, race, sexu-

ality, class and so much more that construct understandings carrying with them so much violence and normativity. Charity ads which line the walls of buses, appear on tv and facebook, are for most people, one of their most common points of encounter with disability. These ads tell us that we have to leave our nonnormative bodies in order to live a good life, that in order to be whole, we cannot be disabled. Disability and race are thrown together to tell a story that disability is not only something to be pitied, but is downright threatening. This is only one site where cultures of undesirability are revealed and constructed. The amount of abuse and violence in marginalized people's lives is simply staggering (Casteel et al., 2008). Cultures of undesirability work in tandem with prisons, psych wards, and group homes to render marginalized people disposable; thus isolate, punish and pathologize them for deviation. Cultures of undesirability are at play in the total lack of regard for accessibility that occurs when community events lack all kinds of access (financial, physical, social, cultural, etc) and thus exclude any number of communities and community members. As Mia Mingus says when speaking to the ways that we must move beyond thinking about access as a bunch of logistics to cross off a list.

The weight of inaccessibility is not logistical. It is not just about ramps, ASL interpreters, straws and elevators. It is a shifting, changing wall—an ocean—between you and I. It is just as much feeling and trauma as it is material and concrete. It is something felt, not just talked about. It is made up of isolation from another night at home while everyone else goes to the party. The fear of being left by the people you love and who are supposed to love you. The pain of staring or passing, the sting of disappointment, the exhaustion of having the same conversations over and over again. The throbbing foolishness of getting your hopes up and the shrinking of yourself in order to maintain (Mingus, 2012, np).

I hear cultures of undesirability in conversations about how sad and hard it would be to have a disabled kid, and in the silence of never being asked on dates. The only thing we can hope for is a cure and to stay alive; certainly we are not supported to expect large-scale structural change, love, community, justice, and hot sex. I am using the concept of cultures of undesirability rather than “disableism” to speak to experiences of sexual oppression and exclusion in an attempt to keep my analysis open to the complexities of identities, bodies, experiences and social locations that are impacted by the wide scope of cultures of undesirability³. I have

also chosen this phrase as it has the potential to connect feelings and practices of desiring/being desired to systems of oppression as found in historical and contemporary manifestations of eugenics, economies of desirability as well as practices of cultural production. Where do you feel cultures of undesirability?

Cultures of undesirability are far from accidental. In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Sara Ahmed encourages us to not just consider where we are, what we are facing, and what captures our attention, but also the work that brought us to our particular orientations (2006). According to Ahmed, the experience of “feeling at home”, or knowing which way we are facing, is about building worlds. This process of building is not casual, accidental or uncomplicated. There is a political economy of attention. We are directed in certain directions more than others. We build with histories and are built from and through histories. Ahmed and Eli Clare name the ways both our bodies and the social body are being pressed in particular directions leaving impressions on the skin (Clare, 2001). Ahmed refers to these as points of pressure as straightening devices. I had to wear a back brace until I got back surgery in the 5th grade to straighten my spine. This was a painful process. Yet, no amount of bracing, internal or external, could bring this unruly body in line. THANK GOODNESS.

We are surrounded by understandings of disability that perpetuate and propagate cultures of undesirability. How often do we encounter images of disability resistance? Resistance images that capture and reflect our lives in all of their complex splendor and hardship. Why don't we see images that refute us as helpless victims of our bodies, highlighting and eliminating our agency and power. What would the world look like if these were the stories of disability we were surrounded by?

The multitude of ways we build worlds amidst these complex exchanges of limitation and possibility reminds us that we don't only inherit oppression, we also live with, draw on and create legacies of resilience and transformation. This practice of obscuring the production and operation of the dominant culture and knowledge is absolutely connected to maintaining systems of privilege as well as to my concept of sites of shame as sites of resistance. Repetition is powerful. We have taken in and internalized so much of this crap that we need to reteach ourselves and each other about our loveliness. If we don't share struggles, passions, and dreams with each other, then we may miss out on powerful imaginings that shift the normative power structure.

Abby Wilkerson's reframing of shame as a part of social control in *Disability, Sex Radicalism and Political Agency* expanded my thinking about shame to include the ways shame is spun to internalize, naturalize and individualize oppression (2002). The idea of sites of shame as sites of resistance asserts that when we visit the very sites where we feel the most shame, we can learn something important because that shame is produced in order to keep us from accessing those very things about ourselves and our communities that may offer us different ways of being, feeling, imagining, and resisting.

Audre Lorde encourages us to resist silencing, ignoring or hiding these sites of shame; for her we need to spend some time with them, get to know them, flaunt them (1984). By doing this work, we can, as bell hooks encourages us, imagine otherwise (2003, 2010). The concept of sites of shame as sites of resistance can be useful in countering the erosion of marginalized people's individual and collective sense of worth. This erasure is absolutely strategic in the ways it only justifies oppression, but also seeks to limit people's capacity to resist as the forces of individualization pre-empt oppressed people from getting together to build community and coalition.

Porn

I make porn from this position of "sites of shame as sites of resistance" as a way of engaging with and understanding disability and desirability differently. In many ways, porn (both mainstream and counterpublic) repeats the current dominant power structures in the stories it tells about bodies and how they are valued. In porn, we are often exposed to a fairly homogeneous representation of desirable subjects. Through everyday encounters and moments, a corporeal, backgrounded know-how emerges that grants to white, settler, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class, non-disabled, masculinity, an ease of moving through the world with a lack of self-consciousness. When this ease is never interrupted, a higher level of sedimentation occurs, meaning that one is more likely to experience the world as given (Ahmed, 2006). This sedimentation is what enables the naturalization of the operation of the dominant ideology, allowing those who fit in a greater capacity to accept the way things are. What becomes evident in these endeavours is the intertwining of the visual with the creation of truth, reality, storytelling and desire.

Stories emerge in the flow of power, and that power flows simultaneously in what Plummer calls positive (i.e., creative, and productive) and negative (i.e., oppressive and restrictive) ways (2007). Power moves through and within lives, situations, “habitual networks of social activity” and the “whole negotiated social order” (Plummer, 2007, 26). When wrestling with questions of what stories are heard, tellable, felt, and believable, and so on, we see power operating on both a personal level and a social level. Some paths are less followed, some stories are not heard as believable, and some expressions of embodiment are not readable through dominant frames. Certain stories, ones that tend to affirm the way things are and reinforce dominant ideologies, are heard and are easier to understand because they are familiar. We have been surrounded by them our whole lives. It may be frustrating, but it certainly is not surprising that students who have never encountered queercrip porn are left disoriented. Similarly, nondisabled queer communities’ standards of desirability are reflected and nurtured by queer porn that has yet to re-imagine disability, and a lot of other identities that are excluded from the queer porn scene (people of colour/trans women/fat people, and so many more). These stories are in need of some queercrip porn disruption. Queer porn expands the relational fabric in ways specific to the communities engaged in their enactment, but still falls short of re-imagining ways of life that speak to the complexities of an expansive relational fabric.

When marginalized characters are present in porn, we are often only able to be desirable in particular ways. We are regularly hypersexualized, tokenized, and/or segregated into fetish markets. At the same time, our sexual labour is often undervalued (Miller-Young, 2010). We must also question otherness in porn as imagined through disableist, colonialist, patriarchal, nationalist, racist, capitalist and heteronormative frames to reflect dominant imaginings and maintain privilege. Yet, if we stop the engagement there and dismiss porn as simply oppressive or “bad,” we miss out on the creative potential of porn. Reframing porn as a technology or as a socially emergent, interactive, dynamic, situated, embodied discursive storytelling practice enables us also to recognize the ways that porn acts as a “fictive discursive practice that produces different conditions of possibility” (Champagne, 1991, 205). This framing means that porn is also a part of power, not somehow outside of it.

I want to use porn’s role in producing, sharing, and acquiring sexual knowledge and know-how. Often this knowledge and know-how reflects that which supports

the cultural norms of those in positions of privilege. The skills, knowledge and experiences of marginalized communities are often left out of mainstream culture (hooks, 1992). This exclusion means there is a lack of representation and resources that speak to and supplement marginalized people experiences and skills. We have to develop skills and specific forms of know-how, sexual and otherwise, in order to navigate and survive in a world that functions through the simultaneous exploitation and systemic erasure of bodies determined as either undesirable and/or hypersexual (Miller-Young, 2010). Sexual stories give us access to languages to articulate feelings, desires, and so on (Plummer, 2007). Storytelling and sharing allow marginalized communities to enter into community, to cultivate and circulate possibility and tactics, and to foster community building (Creative Interventions, nd). In order for stories to be successful; they need strong communities to hear them. Susie Bright, talking about her life as a lesbian sexpert and co-creator of *On Our Backs*, a lesbian porn magazine started in the mid 1980s, speaks to this inter-relatedness of stories and community. She says,

the satisfaction of introducing women to the words that describe our sexual lives, to the pictures of our bodies and desires, to the confidence of hearing other women's common and kinky sexual experiences – well, there's been no turning back (Bright, 1998, 15).

As Foucault states, “When we pay attention to the social and cultural history of knowledge, the supposed stability of these conventions and norms is challenged allowing for the production of different or new subjugated knowledges” (1980, 82). I engage with the ways that queercrip porn can be useful as a strategy of survival in the sharing and cultivating of queercrip knowledge, pleasure and imaginings among queercrip communities.

Stories that practice disidentifications and world-making (Munoz, 1999), use arts of life and ways of life to combat our ever shrinking relational fabric (Champagne, 1991), and reframe ideologies to disrupt normative ideologies and systems of oppression and leave us disoriented. These disorienting acts not only challenge our individual sense of comfort and familiarity, but also question the mechanisms that enable these feelings in the first place. These examples stress that it is critical to focus on systems rather than identities in positing a vision of transformation

and resistance that doesn't just benefit those with relative privilege. This emphasis enables us to attend to the ways that marginalized people can unite in differences, as well as in specific and often shared experiences, creating ample opportunity for coalition and collaboration (Cohen, 1997).

As Powerful as the Culture of Undesirability is, We are Stronger.

I am currently working on a dissertation where part of my research method is collaborating in the production of queercrip porn and interviewing a small group of lovely people who identify as, or with the term queercrip. The stories centered in this project are of queercrip flaunting, survival and flourishing. I want to think, feel, talk, create and share these stories. My work is shaped by Mia Mingus and Stacey Milbern who remind me of the importance of building crip solidarity from a perspective that takes sites of shame as sites of resistance to any project of transformation. As Mingus writes, "we will weave need into our relationships like golden, shimmering glimmers of hope—opportunities to build deeper, more whole and practice what our world *could* look like" (2010, np). I am thankful for the culture of resistance and desirability that marginalized people create every day. I want us to revel in the Sins Invalid clips on youtube and the excellent and moving queer and trans people of color centered performance nights we have in Toronto where folks are vulnerable, fierce and fabulous. I want us to embody cultures of resistance and resilience by blockading inaccessible public transit when yet again they raise transit fares, or as we occupy government offices when they cut necessary social support, or as we cuddle with a partners and friends. I want us to feel our loveliness in the power, vulnerability, and resilience we express in tears of joy, laughter, and rage.

We need stories that capture what Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarashina and ET Russian call the lust of recognition (2010). Recognizing the hotness in each other's cripness. As we reteach each other of our loveliness with a glance or a squeeze. We need to avoid simply reversing the narratives speaking only to the "positive" side, presenting simplistic purely celebratory narratives of success. Together we can create space for and tell stories that reflect the multifaceted nature of our experiences.

Endnotes

- ¹ My somewhat fluid and ambiguous usage of “we” and “us” is intentional. It is meant to allow the reader to situate themselves and think about the practices and processes of inclusion and exclusion.
- ² I use the term disabled person/people/activists through out this paper. While all language brings with it its own historical cultural baggage, I prefer the term disabled as it highlights and emphasizes the social process which occurs on and through bodies. Also, while I respect “person-first” language as being empowering and important in many communities, for me it still feels like something that you add on to an already established idea of personhood. This notion of personhood often unintentionally and intentionally assumes supposedly neutral social locations, which in fact are often privileged identities made invisible through the processes of naturalization. Therefore I choose to make evident the social meaning making that is occurring on and through bodies.
- ³ For a strategic call to use “disableism” rather than “ableism,” please see AJ Withers’ website <http://still.my.revolution.tao.ca/node/68>

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