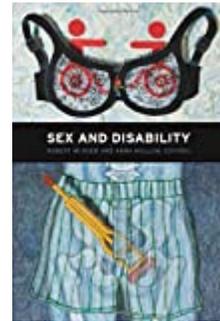


Robert McRuer, Anna Mollow, eds. *Sex and Disability*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012. xi + 417 pp. \$94.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-5140-5; \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-5154-2.



Reviewed by Nina Mackert (Universität Erfurt)

Published on H-Disability (September, 2014)

Commissioned by Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

Sex has, sometimes, been a topic of disability activists and scholars who challenged the notion of the desexualized disabled subject. While disability has, to a much lesser extent, been discussed in queer studies, scholars of disability studies and especially disability theory have increasingly pointed to the intersections or analogies of sex and disability, of queer theory and disability theory, and of compulsory heterosexuality and able-bodiedness. With *Sex and Disability*, Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow present an anthology that takes up these strands. The volume aims to “develop analyses of the myriad ways in which sex and disability, despite their segregation in dominant culture, do in fact come together” (p. 2). Next to the introduction, the authors of seventeen diverse and illuminating chapters explore the different kinds of intersections of sex and disability and the manifold directions in which this analysis could lead us. By doing this, they challenge hegemonic understandings of sex and disability “in the dominant culture as well as in academic engagements with these concepts.

The introduction sets the tone for the volume by queering not only the field of sex and disability but also “appropriate” academic writing about it. McRuer and Mollow have arranged the essays in five subgroups, which are headlined “Access,” “Histories,” “Spaces,”

“Lives,” and “Desires.” They embed each part in a broader context of activism and scholarship, highlighting the rich activist tradition of disability and queer scholarship. It is a particular strength of the introduction that McRuer and Mollow include personal narratives into their discussion of queer and disability (scholarly) politics, thereby ventilating the nexus of personal experiences, political analysis, and academic expectations. In stimulating reflections on their ability and desire to claim an identity as queer and/or disabled subjects, the editors intervene in discussions about identity politics. They stress their inability “to displace [identity] completely” while at the same pointing to its instability (p. 23).

“Access” already forms a key term in disability studies. However, until now it has been used in regard to public spaces. The chapters in this part extend the concept to the alleged “private” sphere and rethink it as disabled peoples’ access to sex to their acknowledgment as sexual subjects in a variety of ways, including to sexual partners, privacy, or parenthood. Russell Shuttleworth, for example, discusses his research on the sociosexual experiences of men with cerebral palsy in his essay “Bridging Theory and Experience: A Critical-Interpretive Ethnography of Sexuality and Disability.” Shuttleworth shows how his methodological framework provides an insight

into the effect that sociopolitical processes and structures and symbolic meanings have on disabled people's sense of desirability, sexual expression and well-being, sexual experiences, and embodied sexual feelings, as well as the resistance they often deploy against sexual restrictions (p. 55). By stressing the alternative sexual ethics that the interviewed men have developed (p. 64), Shuttleworth highlights the potential of disabled sex to contribute to a fluid understanding of sex and bodily transformation in general.

The chapters in *Histories* also stress the malleability of sex and disability. Michelle Jarman, for example, connects U.S.-American white-on-black lynching and eugenic sterilization practices in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Her intersectional analyses suggest that the brutal excess of lynching served a contrastive function to eugenic methods, rendering their purportedly scientific rhetoric and medicalized violence seemingly more benign (p. 100). Thereby, Jarman not only broadens scholarship on both of these topics but also shows how the intersection of race and disability changed these categories, enforcing racism as well as ableism.

Spaces engages with the different boundaries of geographic and discursive spaces that are formed, defended, or subverted along understandings and practices of sex and disability. Among the remarkable texts in this part is Chris Bell's *I'm Not the Man I Used to Be: Sex, HIV, and Cultural Responsibility*. Here, the late Bell explores spaces and limits in two ways. Firstly, his analysis of two court cases in Atlanta highlights the regimes of risk and safety in public debates on HIV. In one case, the HIV-positive status of the defendant played no role, in the other, it stood at the center of the case. Bell analyzes the regimes of risk that underlie and produce those court cases as politics of containment of HIV-positive subjects and, more generally, sexual expression. Not only must people be protected from contracting HIV, he argues, but it is also important to consider the oft-maligned and rarely discussed wishes of HIV-positive individuals because the protection of sexual desire must be a priority too (p. 226). Secondly, by embedding his remarks into personal narratives about his own sexual practices and the effects of risk discourse on him as an HIV-positive subject, Bell engages with the risky space of including personal experiences into scholarly writing.

Autobiographical writing about the nexus of sex and disability is at the center of *Lives*. In her salty essay *Fingered*, Leslie Frye recounts an experience in the supermarket: "Your hand is so freaky, you are a freak!" a

young boy shouted at her and explicitly doubted her bodily abilities (p. 256). After a while spent trying to convince the child (whose mother did not know how to deal with the situation) that she indeed was able to manage, for instance, eating with the hand, jumping rope, and riding bikes, she inwardly turns the boy's and his mother's gaze into an erotic spectacle, fantasizing about the places where her hand had been and could be. Frye refuses to submit to the imperatives of what Lee Edelman calls "the disciplinary image of the innocent Child," the editors comment in their introduction (p. 20).

While Frye does not discuss the queer scholar Edelman explicitly, a few of the essays in the volume do notably, Mollow's sharp *Is Sex Disability? Queer Theory and the Disability Drive*, which forms one of the chapters in the last section of the book, *Desires*. While all four texts in this subgroup ask what happens when we think of disabled subjects as queer and of queerness as disability, Mollow's theoretically strong text challenges core ideas of disability theory, namely, the positive identity of the disabled subject. Mollow takes up the persistent ignorance toward disability politics' claims of proud disabled people's identities in dominant culture. Even when those are successful, she argues, they create new margins of dehumanization and abjection. That is why she calls for a new politics of disability. Drawing on Edelman's thoughts on the death drive and queer theory (as well as Leo Bersani's work), she reflects on the possibility of claiming the death drive for disability theory. In his controversial *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), Edelman takes up the psychoanalytical concept of the death drive to mark a profound negativity that queer people stand for in a society soaked by what he calls "reproductive futurism." Mollow now suggests defining ableism as "rehabilitative futurism," as pervasive ideology of cure, optimization, and fitness. She proposes that disability theory should, instead of claiming proud disabled identities, embrace the negativity of the disability drive to effectively undercut the rehabilitative ideal.

Mollow and McRuer have edited an important book. The collection is an exciting contribution to the fields of disability, queer studies, and queer theory. Every chapter is an inspirational read, but taken together, the contributions provide insightful discussion with layers of reflection that would be difficult to incorporate otherwise. The volume not only shows the multiple ways sex and disability are intertwined, but also invites readers to think beyond established understandings of those concepts, thereby challenging boundaries and transforming ideas of disability and sex.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-disability>

Citation: Nina Mackert. Review of McRuer, Robert; Mollow, Anna, eds., *Sex and Disability*. H-Disability, H-Net Reviews. September, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=40374>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.