Erasing Queerness/ Constraining Disability

Filmic Representations of Queers with Disabilities in *Frida* and *Double the Trouble, Twice the Fun*

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L'auteure de cet article se questionne sur la représentation des "queer » handicapées dans Frida et Double the Trouble, Twice the Fun. Dans ces séries qui entrecroisent les orientations afin d'élargir la compréhension contemporaine de l'érotique.

The history of the depiction of sexuality and disability in commercial and independent film and video is largely one of erasure. Where persons with disabilities are included, they are characterized by stereotypes. Women are cast as asexual whereas men are feminized, rendered sexless, or depicted as consumed by "diseased lusts" (Finger 292). Where queers with disabilities are represented, their presence in film and video is marked by serial representations—first disability then sexuality—rather than by more inclusive representations of intersectional identities.

This paper combines feminist disability studies, critical race theory, and queer theory to examine the way in which disabled queer sexuality is constructed in Julie Taymor's film *Frida* and in Pratibha Parmar's video *Double the Trouble, Twice the Fun.* Disability is understood in this paper to be a broad category that may be manipulated by hegemonic systems of representation.[1] To deconstruct oppressive filmic representations of disabled queers, I will highlight not only the ways in which the sexuality of persons with disabilities has been distorted, but also the transgressive potential of these depictions of disabled sexuality and their potential for contributing to a re-imagination of sexuality—both for people with disabilities and for the nondisabled—for queers and for heterosexuals. One of the limitations of disability theory to date is that while it highlights the distortion of narratives about sexuality and disability as well as oppressive depictions of disabled sexuality, it fails to note the radical potential of positive depictions of disabled sexuality to inform and evolve contemporary understandings of sexuality both for temporarily able-bodied persons[2] and for people with disabilities. Viewing the sexuality of people with disabilities as "asexual or malignantly sexual extends a marginalizing wall protecting ableist views of the disabled body as other, and protecting ableism as a legitimate social (and sexual) practice" (Cherney 166). To bring these "closeted bodies" out into the open (Linton 4), I go beyond a critique of the way the sexualities of persons with disabilities are traditionally represented in film—infantilized and rendered sexless or portrayed as sexually deviant—to consider the potential of othered bodies to reimagine the erotic.

Serial Representations: *Frida*, Disability and Sexuality

Frida provides a demonstration of the limiting nature of those filmic representations that fail to represent the complexity of intersectional identities. A biography of artist Frida Kahlo, the film *Frida* largely erases the effects of her multiple disabilities as well as of her queer identity. Frida's likely case of spinabifida, as well as her childhood polio that left one of her legs permanently weak and underdeveloped, are edited out by the filmmakers, as is the moustache that characterized all of her self-portraits. Most often, Frida is portrayed as a model of ideal aesthetic and normative femininity and heterosexuality.[3] At age 18, she is injured in a bus accident that significantly damages her spine.[4] From this moment, her disability strips her of her sexuality. The first time her boyfriend comes to visit her following the bus accident, she mentions how eager she is to have the cast removed so they can have sex again. He looks uncomfortable. Shortly after, he reveals that he has decided to study in Europe—signifying the end of their relationship. For him, Frida's disability has rendered her sexless.

Frida-as-heterosexual-figure is continually emphasized by the film, which minimizes the importance of her painting in favour of attention to her relationship with fellow painter Diego Rivera. Frida's heterosexual relationships rarely make reference to her disability, and her queer

relationships ignore her disability altogether. Not until she is able to walk again does the film allow her to reconnect with Diego Rivera. Once she is able to walk, Frida uses a cane to go and visit Diego in order to ask him to critique her work. She hides it before seeing him, insisting that he come down to view her work rather than confess that she is unable to walk up the stairs to where he is painting. Frida must trade on her (hetero) sexual appeal to persuade Diego to look at her work. Moreover, the film tells us that her appearance—to be desirable—must exclude evidence of disability. Instead of problematizing the need for women to have non-disabled aesthetic "cultural capital"—particularly impossible for women with disabilities—Frida's need to draw Diego's attention to her in this way is left unquestioned in the film. When Diego later comes to her house to give her his critique of her paintings, Frida's cane has disappeared, never to be seen again. Once Frida is (heteronormatively) resexualized, her disability again disappears. The absent cane signifies that she is made able-bodied by her relationship to Rivera.

The limitations of the representation of Frida's disability are captured by the scene in which Frida makes love for the first time after the accident—only a scar on her back makes reference to her disability. Diego sums up the film's portrait of Frida Kahlo's disability when he kisses her scar and justifiably notes "you're perfect." At the end of the film, when Frida is again disabled and unable to walk, both her body and her sexuality are shown to be subjugated to her disability. After this point, Diego appears to lose his desire for Frida—no reference is made to it after this point in the film. She has again become sexless as a result of her disability. Thus, the film's gaze makes the "normative female a sexualized spectacle" and ignores the non-normative female body altogether (Thomson 26). The only time that Frida is shown to be a sexual person is when she is depicted as able-bodied.

Frida additionally fails to address the issue of disability and queerness. Frida's queer identity is almost entirely erased by the film and Frida is never disabled and queer at the same time. Shortly before they become sexually involved, Diego takes Frida to a party. At the party not only does Frida have no need of her cane, but while there she fluidly and sensuously dances the tango with another woman. This scene, and a second scene in which she has coffee with a woman the morning after they have sex, are the only filmic references to Frida's bisexuality. Significantly, she is represented as able-bodied in both of these scenes. In the "morning after" scene, heterosexuality is centred through the other woman's revelation that she too has slept with Diego. She tells Frida, "You're better than your husband." The scene emphasizes Frida's pain at the revelation of Diego's infidelity, rather than her pleasure at her time with another woman. Diego remains the focus even of Frida's queer relationships, keeping the heteronormative film space unquestioned.

Queers tend to be depicted in films as either asexual or as hypersexualized.[5] The same binary has been imposed on people of colour (hooks). The erasure of queers with disabilities is explained in part by Shelley Tremain. She argues that people with disabilities are largely regarded as asexual—meaning that disabled queers become a "conceptual impossibility" as the category of queer and "disabled person [become] mutually exclusive" (15). Thus, one might "be neither ... but one cannot be both" (Tremain 16). Moreover, queer identity, racialized identity, and disability come into conflict—meaning that race and queerness are erased from these narratives. Frida's racialized identity is hardly addressed by this film, and race and disability are never considered simultaneously. Frida is only disabled in Mexico—where she is not racialized. In the United States, although racialized, she is never disabled. The film is able to cope with only one minority identification at a time. Although *Frida* attempts to subvert the way people with disabilities are rendered asexual, it is unable to contend with the multiple maps of disability, queerness, and racialized identity.

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The film *Frida* has been identified by critics as an accomplishment; often lauded for its ability to portray Frida as a complex character who, as one critic notes: "lived a long life devoted to painting, radical politics, bad behaviour and sexual adventure ... *despite* crippling injuries from a bus accident when she was 18" (McGurk 9W, emphasis mine). In keeping with this review's emphasis on Frida's achievements *in spite* of her disability, it is the film's failure to significantly consider the intersectionality of racialized or queer sexuality and disability that make this a problematic portrait of Frida Kahlo. Moreover, in the tradition of films that feature disability, this film focuses on a heroic narrative—centering Frida as a contemporary heroine and icon as both a talented painter and as a Communist whose work within the communist movement in Mexico and whose marriage to one of

Mexico's most famous muralists made her a minor celebrity in her own time. This is despite the fact that the film makes use of traditional "practices of looking" through the adoption of a scopophilic gaze that features Frida most often as the able-bodied object of the camera rather than its subject (Sturken and Cartwright) and in the film's lack of attention to Frida's self portraits. Very few of them are included—denying Frida the chance to be the subject of her own gaze notwithstanding that this is a key biographical detail and an essential component of Frida Kahlo's life's work.

Frida is not a film that deals with the disabilities of those already at the margins of society. For a film that does not treat disability and sexuality either in isolation or consecutively, but discusses the intersectionality of the oppression of disabled queers/disabled queers of colour, it is necessary to look to independent, feminist filmmaker Pratibha Parmar's video *Double the Trouble, Twice the Fun* (1992). Parmar's video demonstrates how intersectional understandings of disabled queer sexuality may broaden contemporary and constraining understandings of the erotic.

Double the Trouble, Twice the Fun: The Demand for Visibility

> It angers me that I remain an outsider in the disability community as a lesbian. Yet, I'm also invisible within the lesbian and gay community as a disabled person.
>
> —Interview, *Double the Trouble, Twice the Fun*

Highlighting the way "belonging yet not belonging presents peculiar challenges" (Collins), this respondent sets the tone for Pratibha Parmar's provocative film *Double the Trouble, Twice the Fun*. Parmar attempts to interrupt the erasure of "outsiders within"—that of disabled queer persons—from mainstream discourses around sexuality by careful attention to and inclusion of their perspectives. In her documentary, Parmar includes interviews with her respondents, many of whom are also performers. A number of their performances are included, including one by an accapella group that performs in both sign language and English. This film also features a staged seduction scene between two gay men in wheelchairs.

> I'm not going to be invisible. I've done that for long enough. I refuse to be invisible any longer.
>
> —Interview, *Double the Trouble, Twice the Fun*

In *Double the Trouble, Twice the Fun*, Parmar's queer, disabled respondents resist the vanishing tricks used to eliminate them from commercial films that take up questions of disability and sexuality. Pseudo-inclusion (Thiele 38) of the experiences of disabled queers—in which the experience of one disabled queer is generalized to represent the experience of the community—is rejected by Parmar as she neither "tokenizes" nor "universalizes" the sexual experiences of her respondents, but instead includes a range of voices and a diversity of experiences. In this way, Parmar is able to highlight the distinct ways different members of the queer, disabled community understand sexuality, without falling into the trap of treating these individuals "as a unitary group" (Begum 70) or attempting to assert the "pathetic pretence that [these differences] do not exist" (Lorde 112).

Parmar refuses to view disabled queer sexualities through a heteronormative or ableist lens. Rather, Parmar draws on the work of Audre Lorde in that she does not advocate the mere tolerance of differences between disabled queers but instead suggests—through an erotic scene between two male lovers as well as through numerous interview clips where respondents discuss their understanding of the erotic—that these differences (in sexual practices as well as in their understandings of the erotic) are the "necessary polarities between which creativity can spark" (Lorde 110). This film is not intended as a form of justification that queer disabled sex is "just as good" as sex between heterosexual and/or non-disabled persons, but that it is a new understanding of the erotic that will enrich the sexual lives of people of all abilities and all orientations. In this way, Parmar does not attempt to use the "master's tools to dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 112), nor does she manifest a need to explain the lives of the oppressed to the oppressor. She clearly understands the latter technique to be "an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns" (Lorde 113). Rather, Parmar instead puts her energy into more useful tasks: that of "devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future" (Lorde 113) with respect to re-imagining the erotic.

Thus, Parmar's film, unlike *Frida*, is engaged in the work of redirecting the objectifying, exploitative, and harmful gaze of the ableist mainstream. However, it moves beyond this redirection and works to develop a critical "oppositional gaze" (hooks). In *Looking White People in the Eye*, Sherene Razack argued that the encounter between colonizer and colonized (as made manifest through the gaze) is a moment when oppressed peoples are turned "into objects, to be held in contempt or saved from their fates by more civilized beings" (Razack 3). This gaze, which has the power to harm, is disrupted numerous times in *Double the Trouble, Twice the Fun*. For example, one of Parmar's respondents has only one arm, and she has named her stump "Melanie." This woman not only acknowledges this harmful gaze upon her body, but refutes it, having inked on Melanie the words "Fuck off." Thus, when people stare at Melanie, she deliberately holds her up, explicitly telling them to "fuck off." In doing so, she reclaims her own subjectivity and agency as well as disdaining their pitying glances by actively challenging their assumptions that she is an object of misfortune. With this action, she is demanding the move "from pity to

respect" (Razack 1) from people who are attempting to objectify her with their gaze. This respondent is adopting an "oppositional gaze" that "disrupts standard viewing practices through critical engagement" (hooks)—highlighting the agency of people with disabilities.

The performers in *Double the Trouble, Twice the Fun* invite a change in the gaze. Instead of a hard look that denotes a "structured power relation" (hooks 115), the respondents of Parmar's film return the gaze and, by performing their disabled bodies in a way which invites celebratory visual pleasure as opposed to the objectifying stare, Parmar's respondents assert that they want their "look[s] to change reality" (hooks 118). Parmar's respondents also refuse the exploitative gaze without falling into the feminist trap of fetishizing strength. Rather, they discuss how strength has often been a keystone of queer culture and queer aesthetics, and highlight that this is problematic for disabled bodies (Kang and Magnet, 8).

However, although Parmar's film includes the perspectives of people of colour, her film contains no discussion of the intersectionality of race with (dis)ability and sexuality. Race analysis remains largely absent from her film. The mere presence of individuals of colour in the film does not make racial identities politicized in the work (Mohanty 21, 22). As a result, Parmar leaves the whiteness (and hence the relational privilege) of the majority of her respondents unquestioned (Kang and Magnet, 15).

Conclusion

Far from being limited to the heart-wrenching "three-hankie dramas" used by critics to describe movies which have disabled characters, a review of the depiction of sexuality and disability in *Frida* and in *Double the Trouble, Twice the Fun* reveals an emphasis on a more positive task—that of insisting upon the "extension of legitimacy to bodies that have been regarded as false, unreal, and unintelligible" (Butler xxiii). However, *Frida* remains fundamentally limited by its failure to consider the intersectionality of her identity—she is alternately queer, a person of colour, and then disabled, rarely inhabiting more than one identity at a time.

Disability theorist Rosemary Garland Thomson has extended Bakhtin's theory of "disorderly bodies"—in which he notes the potential challenge of these bodies to the existing social order—to argue that disabled bodies might fill this role. This is the way Parmar's respondents use their bodies—attempting to change the structured power relations through the celebration of their bodies through both performance and sexuality. In Parmar's video, "disabled figures operate in varying degrees as challenges to the cultural status quo, introducing issues and perspectives with various potential to refigure the social order" (Thomson 39). Parmar's film is additionally important in that it explicitly highlights the experiences of those voices at the margins in its attempt to "contribute to the self-determination or self-definition of disabled people" (Linton 141) through the discussion of how these disabled individuals reclaim their sexuality by "claiming [their] extraordinary bodies" (Thomson 105). Both of these films show the need to think about the disability community as a nuanced, complex entity, which like any other community (majority or minority) cannot be represented by a few tokenized individuals. Further work might examine the potential of these representations to achieve change in the way in which we think about sexuality, and consider in greater detail feminist disability theorist Simi Linton's proposition that if "disabled people and their knowledge were fully integrated into society, everyone's relation to his/her body would be liberated" (117).

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[1]As the history of freak shows which included the "display" of people like Saartje Baartman (the "Hottentot Venus") remind us—"no firm distinction exists between primarily formal disabilities and racial physical features considered atypical by dominant white standards" (Thomson 14).

[2]I use this term following on the work of disability theorists Susan Wendell and Rosemary Garland Thomson.

[3]Early long shots show her running joyfully from one end of the frame to the other on two strong legs, and she is even able to make love to her boyfriend standing up.

[4]In fact, Frida is cinematically shown to be the "author of her own misfortune," as if her impetuous decision to sprint for the bus leads her to the accident.

[5]Rupert Everett in *My Best Friend's Wedding* is an example of a queer whose sexuality is denied. Hypersexualized queer sexuality is the focus of the series *Queer as Folk.*

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FARAH MAHRUKH COOMI SHROFF

Jaan

My grandmother (now 95) and i play a fun game
Twinkling Eyes Dancing Hands
Giving Receiving Love for Love

Granny: *"Tu mari kaleji chhe!!"*
i am her kidney, inside her, so vital

Farah: *"Tu maru bejoo chhe!!"*
She is my brain, teaching truths

Granny: *"Tu mari dihl chhe!!"*
i am her heart, beating life

Granny and me, back and forth,
When all the organs have been named:
"tu mari jaan chhe!!"

You are my life, my essence, the breath that makes me who i am,
A vibrant song resonating deep in my soul

In Gujarati, expressing love is like saying "you are so important to me that I can't live without you—just like I can't live without my kidneys." The ultimate form of devotion is to declare that our beloved is the essence of life itself, our soul (jaan).

Farah writes: "Coomi is my grandmother's first name. Marukh is my mother's first name (and Shroff is my father's last name). When i was quite young i decided to change my middle names to honour the wonderful women who raised me along with my amazing father."