

Slater, J. (2015). Young disabled women learning and resisting (a)sexual expectation: challenging ableism in educational research on gender and sexuality. Paper presented at BERA 2016, Belfast.

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*Time: 15 minutes, 30seconds*

*Slide 1*

The stories that I'm going to draw on in this paper come from my doctoral fieldwork: a 12 month ethnography with young disabled people in the UK and Iceland.

*Slide 2*

In particular, I'm drawing on a chapter from my new book (Slater, 2015) and a paper I've recently written with a colleague, Kirsty Liddiard (Liddiard & Slater, 2015, f.c.).

*Slide 3*

The quote on the slide frames this paper. I want to start, therefore, with the vignette that it emerged from, which I will return to at the end.

During the research period I spent three months with young disabled activists in Reykjavik, Iceland and lots of this time was spent with two young women, Embla and Freyja, chairwoman and directress of Reykjavik's first and only independent living centre (NPA Miðstöðin, 2013). On the first Friday night I was in Iceland, the three of us headed downtown, and the picture on the screen now is of me and Embla that night. On the same night I recorded the following in my research diary:

Embla drove to pick me up, and, as I was getting into the car, she told me that Freyja was running late. She still had to do her makeup and, because she takes *ages* to do her makeup, she'd catch up with us later. I turned and looked at Embla: she's wearing a black dress, leather jacket, heeled boots, face made-up, and hair done; nothing unusual there – she always looks great. Then I catch a glimpse of myself in the rear-view mirror: make-up-less, hair a mess. I look down at my attire: the usual jeans, my most 'Icelandic' woolly jumper, hidden under my technical raincoat. Gloves, hat and snow-boots finish the outfit off nicely. Mum will be pleased at least; very sensible clothing for the Icelandic Winter. I wonder how I'm going to feel with the hipsters of trendy downtown Reykjavik though and feel a bit down heartened. "You look nice," I say to Embla, "I'm going to feel a right scruff coming out with you two". "Don't worry about it",

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Embla reassures me, “it’s okay for you; you’re not disabled. I have to get dressed up; don’t want to live the disability stereotype!” (Record from research diary, 4th February 2012, in Slater, 2013a).

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1999) argues that rather than something ‘natural’ sex and gender are acts materialised through performativity. Gender is presented to us a binary male/female construct and heterosexual hegemony is sured-up through a reiterative performance of these roles (Butler, 1999). Embla, Freyja and I had many conversations around the ‘performance’ of gender whilst I was in Iceland. My disabled peers felt that my ‘able-bodied’ privilege (and I’d argue there are also other forms of privilege at work here) allowed me perform gender, through a resistance of heterofemininity, in a way that they, as disabled young women, could not. They told me that whilst I could make a decision to not put on make-up and get dressed up on a night out, they felt it was more important to assert themselves as a gendered and sexual beings. We see in the above story that Embla does this by ‘dressing up’ and asserting a feminine, or perhaps femme, identity. Taking the ‘not bothering’ option would (as Embla puts it) mean ‘living the stereotype of the cute little disabled girl’; the asexual disabled person (Garland-Thomson, 2002).

#### *Slide 4*

Like Butler (1999) troubles the naturalisation of gender and sexuality, Lesko (2012) troubles the naturalisation of ‘youth’. Drawing on Foucault (1977), Lesko uncovers youth not as a ‘natural’ stage of child-adult development, but as a policed ‘border zone’ between child and adult which makes youth a “social fact” produced through disciplining technologies which aim to put young people on the ‘correct’ tracks to adulthood (Lesko, 2002). Technologies such as schools, families and youth services work to shape the incomplete, irrational, unproductive, asexual child into the complete, rational, productive, and (crucial for this paper), *sexual*, adult, particular to a time and place (and I’m conceptualising this border zone as a form of ‘education’ today).

We know that border zones are dangerous. Furthermore, as there are certain racialized, classed, gendered, ableist and hetronormative assumptions of what ‘adults’ should do and be, the technology of youth works in particular gendered, raced, sexualised, and ability dependent ways (Lesko, 2002; McRobbie, 2000; Romesburg, 2008).

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My argument today revolves around disability. However, the larger point I wish to make is that any conversation of gender, sexuality and heteronormativity in childhood/youth, needs to be thought, to borrow Kimberly Crenshaw's (1989) term, intersectionally. Developmental assumptions are ableist. Just as structural heteronormativity means structures and systems revolve around assumptions of heterosexuality, ableism means structures and systems function oppressively around an assumption of a (socially constructed) 'able body'. Furthermore, both ableism and heteronormativity are wrapped up in ideologies of transnational capitalism, patriarchy, coloniality, white supremacy and cissexism (Burman, 2008; Mingus, 2011).

Lesko (2012) highlights that the concept of 'adolescence', for example, was first acknowledged at the turn of the twentieth century; a time of American colonisation. Although projected as 'objective' and 'neutral', the adult citizen desired by psychologists was in fact both raced (white), and gendered (with the majority of study concentrating on boys). Technologies of adolescence became the rationale for boys' education aiming "to produce young, masculine, Christians" (Lesko, 2002, 183) who would work for the good of the nation. There was a general consensus that educators needed to aim to create "more manly boys and more womanly girls" (Lesko, 2012, 66). One way of doing this was to encourage boys to take part in team sports. However, it was thought that team sport would "come naturally to Anglo-Saxon youth but could uplift others if they were educated to it" (Lesko, 2012, 66). In other words, team play was considered as a way to make non-Anglo-Saxon boys 'more manly', and with this were connotations of being 'more white'. Girls on the other hand, were dealt with separately: cheerleading was their role in the team sports.

Although Lesko doesn't address 'disability' through her work, we nevertheless see 'ability' entwined within the racialised, gendered and heteronormative discourses of adulthood. She highlights, for example, the importance put on 'youth' as a time to create a 'healthy' generation of young adults to make up a physically productive workforce who would be able to fight for their country. To be able and adult was also to be white and male (Lesko, 2002).

It is important to not position above discussions as only historical; the contemporary Western 21<sup>st</sup> century adult subject is too implicated in entwined conversations of 'whiteness', compulsory gender binaries, heteronormativity, and 'ability' (Slater, 2015). The border zone

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of youth, therefore, is more dangerous for some than for others (Slater, f.c.). It has been noted in disability studies literature, for example, that developmental discourse serves to dangerously root disabled people as eternal children (Baron, Riddell, & Wilson, 1999; Priestley, 2003; for a fuller account of child/youth/adult discourse see Slater, 2013b), disallowing disabled people (particularly those with labels of learning difficulties) autonomy in, for example, where they live, who they spend time with, what they eat, and indeed, issues of sex, sexuality and consent (Tilley, Walmsley, Earle, & Atkinson, 2012). A 2012 article, focusing on the UK, USA, Canada and Nordic countries highlights that although surgical sterilisation of women with learning difficulties may have decreased, young women are often given long term contraception without their knowledge or consent (Tilley, et al., 2012).

#### *Slide 5*

We see the importance of an intersectional analysis if we consider the following scenario, taken from a participatory study with young disabled people around sex education at school:

“the one group member who had attended a mainstream school said they had been shown videos of very difficult births in order to scare girls off having sex and getting pregnant. Those who had attended special schools were amazed at this. In special schools, they said, teachers ‘would have been too frightened to talk about sex or relationships’. One of the young women in the group had strong views on this issue. She said it was typical of the way special schools treated students that it simply would not occur to them that a girl with a disability might get pregnant before leaving school.

“They couldn’t let you do that [talk about having sex] because the cotton wool would be broken. The cotton wool that they wrap you up in the day you start. By the time you leave the cotton wool has pretty much smothered you”.

(Horgan, 2003, 104-105)

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In the ‘special school’ disabled young people were presumed passive; incapable of having sex and getting pregnant, so they were told nothing. Yet, echoing previous papers today neither is the conversation in the mainstream school helpful; both the ‘mainstream’ and ‘special’ conversations are examples of disciplining practices aiming to shape a certain type of person. In the ‘mainstream school’ young people were considered dangerously active: sex and pregnancy was considered a risk. They were taught that having sex and getting pregnant are bad and painful experiences (Duncan, Edwards, & Alexander, 2010). There is no acknowledgment that teenagers can and *do* make good parents (Duncan, et al., 2010). There is no expansion of the heteronormative trope of sex as penis-in-vagina intercourse that leads to babies (a bad thing) (Duncan, et al., 2010). Young people are not involved in discussions that positioned sex as something that should be fun, pleasurable, done with others or by yourself, and built on positive and ongoing consent. Rather, we see biopolitical regimes working at the border zone of youth which aim to secure the infantilisation of disabled young people considered passive whilst attempts are also made to pacify those who are considered ‘active’ through misinformation, scaremongering and demonization.

#### *Slide 6*

Assumptions of sexual passivity emerged in my own fieldwork. I was running a workshop with a youth forum of a disabled people’s campaigning organisation in the UK. In the break Molly, a 21-year old disabled woman with a physical impairment told me a tale of her 16-year-old self. Molly used to be a swimmer and wanted to start taking the pill so her periods would be predictable and not get in the way of her swimming. She went to the doctor, who was happy to gratify her request. However, when running through his list of questions he became embarrassed; his phrasing going something as follows:

“Erm... I’m really sorry but I’ve, erm, got to ask you this... and I know, well, of course you’re not, I mean, I know you’re not, but I do have to ask, you’re not sexually active... are you?”

Butler (1999, xxii) asks us to consider “how presumptions about normative gender and sexuality determine in advance what will qualify as “human” and the “livable”?” For a life to be considered ‘liveable’ one must be considered an intelligible subject, and for Butler (1999, 22) ““persons” only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with

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recognizable standards of gender intelligibility”. Performed correctly and gender is one box ticked allowing us access to normative adulthood (with all the privileges this entails).

The approach some have taken within disability studies to make disabled people’s sexualities ‘intelligible’, is to argue that disabled young people are ‘just the same as everybody else’. This, however, demonstrates what Sothorn (2007, 147) calls a “liberal intolerability of difference”; a tokenistic form of ‘inclusion’ which “puts pressure on disabled bodies to be sexualised in hegemonically knowable ways” (Sothorn, 2007, 152). In order to be rendered ‘knowable’, both queer sexualities and the disabled body have to be rendered ‘normal’, and, once ‘normal’ they are accepted within a certain ‘knowable’, ‘normal’ frameworks. Although those arguing the normalisation of disabled people’s sexuality through presuming a biological ‘naturalness’ of heterosexuality (Brown, 1994) may assist *some* disabled young people in crossing the border zone of youth, for others, it means remaining an unintelligible subject.

When I was in Iceland, I met a friend of Embla and Freyja’s who was doing her BA research into attitudes towards disabled lesbians (Skjaldardóttir, 2012). Whilst doing this research she was not surprised to find that there was little support for gay disabled women. She was however shocked at the response of many of her friends: “*disabled lesbians... is there such a thing?*”

#### *Slide 7*

To wrap up, I want to once again consider the story of Freyja, Embla and myself going downtown, and bring in the work of disability scholar, Robert McRuer. Just as Butler claims the heterosexual ideal is only a performance, McRuer (2006a, 2006b) argues that the ideal able-bodied identity can never fully be achieved. Importantly, McRuer also highlights that gender and dis/ability are wrapped up and implicated in one-another. As he writes:

“...people with disabilities are often understood as somehow queer (as paradoxical stereotypes of the asexual or oversexual person with disabilities would suggest), while queers are often understood as somehow disabled (as an ongoing medicalization of identity, similar to what people with disabilities more generally encounter would suggest).”

(McRuer, 2006a, 94)

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For both Butler (1999) and McRuer (2006a) considering gender and/or dis/ability as performative also reveals space to subvert these normative gender roles (Sandahl, 1999). They therefore ask us to “work to the weakness in the norm” (McRuer, 2006b, 30): using the inevitable failure to meet up to the heterosexual/able-bodied ‘ideal’ as a way of mobilising.

### *Slide 8*

Following Butler and McRuer, we can begin to conceptualise the stories of going Downtown as forms of resistance, which emerge differently dependent upon perceptions of dis/ability. On the one hand, my own ‘dressing down’ and Embla’s ‘dressing up’ could be presumed to be acting in opposition to, and perhaps un-doing the work of one-another. Yet, this is to oversimplify the situation. Although the way we present ourselves can be a conscious act of resistance, this resistance is functioning within larger systemic constraints, which deem our bodies a locus of social control (Ndopu, 2013). McRuer (2006a, 2006b) argues that like the heterosexual ideal, the performativity of ability has been normalised, naturalised, to the extent that it goes unnoticed. The normative expectation on me as a young non-disabled woman is to perform heterofemininity. A performance of this heterofemininity, however, would not emerge as an utterance, but a silence. In failing to perform heterofemininity, however, attention is brought to my embodiment in a way a ‘dressing up’ may not have done.

Embla’s non-normative embodiment, on the other hand, becomes a spectacle (Shildrick, 1997). To apply McRuer’s (2006a) arguments, we see that by failing to perform ‘ability’, Embla inevitably fails in a performance of heterosexuality. Therefore, it is through a performance of femme that her embodiment acts as resistance. To follow, McRuer, however, Embla not only stands as a challenge to the discourse of disabled people as genderless and asexual (Liddiard, 2011), but also a queering/cripping of gender norms (McRuer, 2006a).

Embla also tells us, however, that although ‘dressing up’ is a conscious political decision, she feels unable to take the ‘not bothering’ option, even when she can’t ‘be bothered’; the risks of being positioned as genderless, and, therefore becoming unintelligible as ‘adult’ are too great. It must also be remembered that Embla, Freyja and I are all white, cisgendered, young women, and none of us are poor. Ndopu, who describes herself as “a Black Queer Crip of the African diaspora”, explains that when wearing trendy, fashionable clothes they are read differently than when wearing casual clothes. As they put it, “casual attire [...] render[s] my

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body the personification of dishevelment and neglect”, not only due to the associations of disability with charity, but the intersectional workings of this perception of charity with gender, sexuality and race.

*Slide 9*

I'll leave you today with a quote from Sothorn (2007, 157): “the point [of our work, in thinking about gender, sexuality, children/young people and education] cannot be safe passage over the river of ableism and heteronormativity to some promised land of liberal inclusion; we must, instead, blow up the bridge!”.

Thank you.

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