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## IS SEX DISABILITY?

### Queer Theory and the Disability Drive

#### ANGRY\_KITTEN

On a June afternoon in 2004, I logged onto *Nerve* magazine's online personals site. Perhaps because my as-yet-unwritten talk for that year's MLA panel on sex and disability was in the back of my mind, my eye was caught by one of that day's "featured profiles." It belonged to "angry\_kitten," a young woman who wrote that the "Celebrity I resemble most" is "Larry Flynt as a girl. Except not overweight or in a wheelchair." Clearly, this witticism implies that if references to *Hustler* magazine are sexy, especially when made by a "girl," then disability is not: being "overweight" or "in a wheelchair," that is, constitutes the antithesis of desirability. Angry\_kitten's self-representation thus performs a disavowal of disability that the genre of the online personal ad seems to demand; health, slenderness, and the regular pursuit of athletic activities are among the most heavily advertised attributes on online dating services.

But angry\_kitten's quip can also be read in another way. Her insertion of the phrase "in a wheelchair" into a personal ad arguably augments the transgressiveness that her self-comparison to Larry Flynt seems designed to signal; it may

have the effect not only of distancing her from wheelchairs and other ostensibly unsexy images but also of metonymically linking the wheelchair, through its association with Larry Flynt, with the pornographic. By connecting disability to both sexual excess and sexual lack, *angry\_kitten's* personal ad encapsulates two apparently opposing ways of thinking about sex and disability. Both of these modes are familiar to disability scholars, who have pointed to ubiquitous cultural representations of disabled people in terms of sexual deficiency, while also calling attention to pervasive associations of disability with excessive sexuality. For example, cognitively disabled people are commonly depicted as childlike and asexual but are also often feared as uncontrollable sexual predators.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, websites for “amputee devotees” present disabled women in terms that evoke sexual excess (a photo of an amputee woman shopping or washing dishes is sufficient to provide “compelling erotic entertainment”) and simultaneously emphasize lack (“A woman is not whole if she does not have something missing!” [www.amputee-devotee.com](http://www.amputee-devotee.com) announces) (Gregson 2).<sup>2</sup>

These contradictory constructions of disability create a double bind for people with disabilities: if disability can easily be interpreted as both sexual lack and sexual excess (sometimes simultaneously), then it seems nearly impossible for any expression of disabled sexuality to escape stigma. A liberal politics of disability might respond to this problem with a reasoned refutation, pointing out that people with disabilities are as sexual as nondisabled people and are no more likely to be “freakishly” or “excessively” so. In support of this claim, one might observe that a person with a spinal cord injury has not “lost” his or her sexuality, or that there’s nothing inherently pornographic or kinky about an image of a short-statured person engaging in sexual intercourse.<sup>3</sup> Yet the culture’s unwillingness to accept these eminently reasonable claims, its persistent insistence that disabled sexuality is somehow both lack (innocence, incapacity, dysfunction) and excess (kinkiness, weirdness, perversion), suggests that something more than reasoned discourse will be necessary in order to understand and respond to the energies that drive this illogical, intractable conception of sex and disability.

These energies might usefully be read in relation to what psychoanalysis terms the “death drive.” In making this argument, I am drawing on writing by Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman, which is often cited as exemplifying an “anti-social” or “antirelational” thesis in queer theory. Bersani and Edelman do not theorize “disability” as such, but as I will demonstrate, their arguments about a destructiveness that may be both inherent in sexuality and incompatible with

liberal politics—or perhaps even with any form of politics or sociality at all—are highly relevant to disability theory.

In choosing the term “disability theory” rather than “disability studies,” I mean to signal a possible difference between these two discourses. For disability *theory*, I propose, sex can no longer be conceived of as a subfield or specialized area of investigation (to which a new anthology might be devoted); rather, disability theory insists, through its sustained engagement with theories of sexuality, that it is impossible to think about either term, “sex” or “disability,” without reference to the other. This is because, as I will demonstrate, sex in a sense “is” disability: the concepts of “sexuality” (as it is elaborated in psychoanalytic theory) and of “disability” (as it is figured in the cultural imaginary) share profound structural similarities; in some instances, they could even be described as two names for the same self-rupturing force. Psychoanalysis calls this force the death drive; in this chapter, I propose that it might also be named the “disability drive.” To foreground associations between disability and the death drive means, as we shall see, theorizing disability in terms of identity disintegration, lack, and suffering. Such terms may seem inimical to a politics of disability liberation. But in this chapter I critique politics of disability that emphasize identity formation and pride, exploring instead the benefits of highlighting those aspects of sex and disability that undercut and perhaps even preclude assertions of humanity.<sup>4</sup>

### CAN DISABILITY THEORY HAVE *NO FUTURE*?

“The Child whose innocence solicits our defense”: this ubiquitous cultural figure is the target of *No Future*, a polemic against an ideology that Edelman defines as “reproductive futurism” (2). “We are no more able to conceive of a politics without a fantasy of the future,” Edelman argues, “than we are able to conceive of a future without the figure of the Child” (11). The invocation of this figure—which, Edelman makes clear, is “not to be confused with the lived experiences of any historical children”—invariably serves to uphold “the absolute privilege of heteronormativity” (11; 2). Therefore, “impossibly, against all reason,” *No Future* “stakes its claim to the very space that ‘politics’ makes unthinkable” (3). Queerness, Edelman asserts, “names the side of those *not* ‘fighting for the children’”; that is, the social order ascribes a fundamental negativity to the queer, who is structurally defined in opposition to “the Child” (*No Future* 3). While liberal politics, putting its faith in reason, seeks to refute this characterization of queerness, Edelman proposes that queers might “do better to consider accepting and even embracing”

it (*No Future* 4). Queers, Edelman maintains, should respond to homophobia not only by insisting upon equal rights within the social order but also: “By saying explicitly what Law and the Pope and the whole of the Symbolic order for which they stand hear anyway in each and every expression or manifestation of queer sexuality: Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital *ls* and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop” (*No Future* 29).<sup>5</sup>

This impassioned polemic is one that disability theory might well take to heart. For the figure that Edelman describes as “the disciplinary image of the ‘innocent’ Child” is inextricable not only from the cultural politics of queerness but also from those of disability (*No Future* 19). After all, it is in the name of the “Child whose innocence solicits our defense” that ritual displays of pity regularly demean disabled people: “Please, I’m begging for survival. I want my kids alive,” Jerry Lewis implores, countering disability activists’ protestations against his assertion that a disabled person is “half a person” (qtd. in Johnson, *Too Late* 58, 53). “You’re against Jerry Lewis!” a surprised passerby exclaims to Harriet McBryde Johnson as she hands out leaflets protesting the Muscular Dystrophy Association, his surprise likely informed by a logic similar to that which, in Edelman’s analysis, undergirds the use of the word “choice” by advocates of legal abortion: “Who *would*, after all, come out *for* abortion or stand *against* reproduction, *against* futurity, and so *against* *life*?” (Johnson, *Too Late* 61; Edelman, *No Future* 16). Similarly, why *would* anyone come out *for* disability, and so against the child who, without a cure, might never walk, might never lead a normal life, might not even have a future at all?

The logic of the telethon, in other words, relies on an ideology that might be defined as “rehabilitative futurism,” a term that I propose might operate alongside, and often in intersection with, Edelman’s “reproductive futurism.” Because if the future, as Edelman maintains, is always imagined in terms of a fantasmatic “Child,” then the survival of this future as the Child is, as the telethon makes clear, threatened not only by queerness but also by disability. Indeed, futurity is habitually imagined in terms that fantasize the eradication of disability: a recovery of a crippled (or hobbled) economy, a cure for society’s ills, an end to suffering and disease. Eugenics’ sterilization and “euthanization” of disabled people is an instantiation of a futurism grounded at once in reproductive and rehabilitative ideals: procreation by the fit and elimination of the disabled, eugenicists promised, would bring forth a better future.

Consider also Edelman's argument that "the lives, the speech, and the freedoms of adults face constant threat of legal curtailment out of deference to imaginary Children whose futures . . . are construed as endangered by the social disease as which queer sexualities register" (*No Future* 19). Replace the words "social disease" with "disease," and "queer sexualities" with "disabled bodies" and Edelman's remarks precisely articulate the connections disability activists and scholars have made between the proliferation of images of pitiable disabled children and the curtailment of actual disabled people's freedoms: in the United States today, nearly two million disabled people are confined to institutions, while poster children and their contemporary correlatives fixate a culture invested in the fantasy of a future without disability.

Given all these interconnections, it is tempting to advocate that disability theory adopt *No Future* as one of its own canonical texts. But of course adoption, in its many forms, has well-known pitfalls. Noting that it is often LGBT people themselves who deliver the "message . . . of compulsory reproduction," Edelman cites Dan Savage's self-congratulatory claim that adopting a child means choosing "something more meaningful than sit-ups, circuit parties, and designer drugs. For me and my boyfriend, bringing up a child is a commitment to having a future" (qtd. in Edelman, *No Future* 75). Textual adoption also has downsides, which Ellen Samuels highlights in her critique of "the wholesale adoption of [Judith] Butler's theoretical framework by disability scholars" ("Critical" 64). "Is it not necessary," Samuels wonders, "to at least ask if there is a difference between disability/impairment and gender/sex—and, since there obviously is, how that difference operates in the present situation?" ("Critical" 64). Also relevant in this context is Trina Grillo and Stephanie M. Wildman's famous critique of "like race" analogies, which, they argue, often have the effect of "stealing" the "center stage" from people of color (621).

In this chapter, rather than treating queerness and disability as definable categories whose differences might be elided by the imprecise use of analogy, I am interested in confounding the meaning of each. In many ways, *No Future* seems to invite such an approach: Edelman steadfastly resists the framing of queerness as an identity whose claims might be diminished by other groups' appropriations. Queerness, he maintains, refuses "every substantialization of identity" (4). However, Edelman's claim to eschew identity politics is regarded by some queer theorists as specious. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz characterizes *No Future* as a form of "white gay male crypto-identity politics" (95); Edelman's work (and Bersani's), he suggests, practices "a

distancing of queerness from . . . the contamination of race, gender, or other particularities that taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference” (11).

Such particularities, it is true, receive relatively marginal attention in *No Future*. Race is mentioned in a brief footnote; in another note, Edelman observes that the “*sinthomosexual*,” his text’s privileged figure for imaging queerness, is most frequently imagined in our culture as being “embodied by machinelike men” rather than women (165, n. 10). A marginalization of topics such as race and gender, Edelman might seem to imply, is a crucial aspect of his argument: after all, queer theory “marks . . . the ‘side’ outside all political sides” (*No Future* 7). Yet *No Future*’s argument unfolds against a backdrop of references to issues of clear political relevance to LGBT people: gay marriage, domestic partnership benefits, antidiscrimination ordinances for LGBT employees, papal pronouncements about homosexuality, queer-baiting of children, and hate crimes against queers. The embrace of queer negativity may, as Edelman insists, entail a refusal of any “determinate stance or ‘position,’” but *No Future*’s argument against reproductive futurism would be far less compelling without its repeated references to—and indeed its implied positionality in relation to—these recognizably political issues (4).

Does this lend support to Muñoz’s charge that *No Future* is invested in a form of “stealth” identity politics (94)? If, according to Edelman’s argument, queers are “singled out,” or “distinctively called,” to perform the rather glamorous-sounding work of figuring “the availability of an unthinkable jouissance,” then are the particular concerns of women, people of color, and disabled people (who may, of course, also be queer) hopelessly mired in the political (109; 26; 39)? Is queer antifuturism, as Judith Halberstam argues of “gay shame,” a “White Gay Male Thing”—and perhaps, by extension, also a “nondisabled thing” (220)?<sup>6</sup> “It has been clear to many of us,” Muñoz writes in an earlier critique of *No Future*, “that the antirelational in queer studies was the gay white man’s last stand” (“Thinking” 825).<sup>7</sup>

But in pointing to a possible dearth of discussion of race and gender (and, one might add, disability) in *No Future*, its critics have not established that its arguments depend upon such exclusions. On the contrary, *No Future*’s claims about queerness’s relationship to negativity and the death drive can be enhanced through an analysis of their potential application to, and intersection with, other minoritizing discourses. Focusing primarily on disability (perhaps one of the “other particularities” toward which Muñoz gestures?), I argue that queer “anti-social” theory should be—and in many ways, already is—a “disabled thing.” In making this argument, I take seriously Edelman’s “insistent refusal of identity

politics” and his expansive definition of queers as “all so stigmatized for failing to comply with heteronormative mandates” (*No Future* 165, n. 10; 17). I thus understand *No Future* as suggesting that the embrace of negativity it advocates for queers must also be available to all subjects whom our culture objects. Such an embrace may indeed be ethically imperative, Edelman argues, because “those of us inhabiting the place of the queer may be able to cast off that queerness and enter the properly political sphere, but only by shifting the figural burden of that queerness to someone else” (*No Future* 27).

Nor, according to my reading of *No Future*, does “choosing to *accept*” the “*structural position* of queerness,” as Edelman advocates, mean abandoning all political projects (27; emphasis in original). It is “politics *as we know it*,” or “every *acknowledged* politics,” that Edelman refuses (*No Future* 3; emphasis added). In turning away from what “will *count* as political discourse,” *No Future* assigns to queer theory an “impossible project” that might, despite itself, be described as political: that of imagining “an oppositional *political* stance exempt from” the imperatives of reproductive futurism (11; 27; third emphasis added). Moreover, Edelman would have queer theory undertake this project without wholly relinquishing the politics we do know, that is, while continuing to insist “on our equal right to the social order’s prerogatives” (*No Future* 29).

I therefore read *No Future* not as advocating that goals such as gay marriage or accessible workplaces be surrendered, but rather as insisting that the work of queer theory—and, I propose here, of disability theory—is also to unsettle the assumptions that underlie these goals. *No Future* issues a troubling challenge: can we envision a politics not framed in terms of futurism or a futurity not grounded in reproductive (or, I ask here, rehabilitative) ideology? Insofar as reproductive (and perhaps also rehabilitative) futurism seem invariably to give shape to “the only politics we’re permitted to know,” Edelman’s refusal of the political cannot easily be dismissed (*No Future* 134).

#### TAKE TINY TIM

Before disability theory considers taking *No Future* as a text of its own, we may first wish to consider Edelman’s take on disability. In support of his argument, in the second chapter of his book, that “acts that make visible the morbidity inherent in fetishization” (such as antiabortion activists’ penchant for displaying photographs of fetuses) are “by no means outside the central currents of social and cultural discourse,” Edelman’s Exhibit A is Tiny Tim:

Take, for example, Tiny Tim—or even, with a nod to the spirit of the late Henny Youngman, “take Tiny Tim, *please!*” His “withered little hand,” as if in life already dead, keeping us all in a stranglehold as adamant as the “iron frame” supporting his “little limbs” . . . ; his “plaintive little voice” . . . refusing any and every complaint the better to assure its all-pervasive media magnification, in the echoes of which, year in and year out, God blasts us, every one . . . and his “patient and . . . mild” . . . disposition so thoroughly matching the perfect humility of its coercive self-display that his father with “tremulous” voice recalls how Tiny Tim “hoped the people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas Day, who made lame beggars walk, and blind men see.” . . .

Very pleasant indeed. And more pleasant by half than remembering, instead, who made lame beggars lame (and beggars) and who made those blind men blind. But then, *A Christmas Carol* would have us believe that we know whom to blame already, know as surely as we know who would silence the note of that plaintive little voice and require that the “active little crutch” . . . kick the habit of being leaned on. (*No Future* 41–42)

The preceding passage may not at first appear to bode well for a disability theory adoption. For one thing, it evinces no particular interest in the politics of disability oppression: the implied referent to the “who” that made “lame beggars lame (and beggars) and who made those blind men blind” is, presumably, “the same God who putatively made them walk, and see”—rather than, as the social model of disability would insist, social structures and architectural and attitudinal barriers. And the “who” that might “require that the ‘active little crutch’ kick the habit of being leaned on” is not, as this formulation might suggest in another context, a rehab counselor or occupational therapist. It refers rather to Scrooge, Edelman’s first example of a “canonical literary instantiation” of what he calls “*sinthomosexuality*,” his neologism for an “antisocial force” that he identifies with queerness (*No Future* 39).

Given the frequency with which disabled people are portrayed as Tiny Tims, the cultural opposition that Edelman identifies between the Child and the *sinthomosexual* might seem to indicate a fundamental opposition between queerness (or *sinthomosexuality*) and disability (or the Child). But the relationship among these terms in *No Future* is more complex than this schema would suggest. In order to gain a fuller view of this complexity, we must turn to Edel-



man's explication of Lacan's concept of *jouissance*. Lacanian *jouissance*, Edelman writes, entails "a violent passage beyond the bounds of identity, meaning, and law" (*No Future* 25). According to Lacan, *jouissance* is "unnamable," and for this reason it is "akin to the quintessential unnamable, that is to say death" (qtd. in Edelman, *No Future* 25). *Jouissance* can take two very different forms. In the first, Edelman explains, "it gets attached to a particular object or end," thus "congealing identity around the fantasy of satisfaction or fulfillment through that object" (*No Future* 25). The death drive is manifested in this first version of *jouissance* when it "produces identity as mortification" (as it does, for example, in fetishizations of "fetal photos" or of the "withered little hand" of Tiny Tim) (*No Future* 25; 41). Lacan's second version of *jouissance*, as Edelman describes it, "tears at the fabric of Symbolic reality as we know it"; it "evokes the death drive that always insists as the void in and of the subject" (*No Future* 25). "Bound up with the first of these death drives is the figure of the Child"; "bound up with the second is the figure of the queer" (*No Future* 25–26).

If the Child and the queer occupy opposing sides of this paradigm in *No Future*, where is disability? It is everywhere. Disability is bound up with the Child, as suggested not only by Edelman's analysis of Tiny Tim but also by his description, in an earlier version of *No Future*'s first chapter, of an antiabortion billboard as a "poster child for children" and by his characterization, in his book, of the Catholic Church as "blindly committed to the figure of the Child" ("Kid" 24; *No Future* 29). And disability figures importantly in the reading of *Silas Marner* that follows Edelman's discussion of *A Christmas Carol*; the "sightless eyes" and "catalepsy" of George Eliot's protagonist aid in making the apparition of the child Eppie seem miraculous (*No Future* 55).

But disability is also enmeshed with the queerness to which, in Edelman's analysis, the Child is opposed. It can be seen in Scrooge's "stiffened" "gait" and in the figure of Captain Hook, whom Edelman describes, along with Scrooge, as embodying "a drive toward death that entails the destruction of the Child" (*No Future* 44, 21). And according to Edelman's analysis of *North by Northwest*, the film's villain, Leonard, embodying *sinthomosexuality*, is "deaf to claims of human fellowship" (*No Future* 20). Then there is irony ("that queerest of rhetorical devices" [*No Future* 23]), which, according to Paul de Man, produces "dizziness to the point of madness" (qtd. in Edelman, *No Future* 87). Tropes of disability are also present in what Edelman reads as Jean Baudrillard's "panicky offensive against reproduction without heterogenital copulation," in which sex is described as devolving into a "useless function" and humans are distinguished

(unsuccessfully, Edelman argues) from “the order of the virus” (qtd. in Edelman, *No Future* 64, 62).

Edelman’s apt reading of these remarks of Baudrillard in relation to what was once called “the gay plague,” as well as his own plays on the word “bent,” suggest that it can often be difficult, in homophobic and ableist culture, to distinguish between queerness and disability (*No Future* 62; 90).<sup>8</sup> Antigay religious leaders, Edelman notes, characterize queer sexualities as “unhealthy” and “ugly,” and “ministries of hope” offer cures to those who have “grown sick-to-death of being queer” (*No Future* 91; 47).<sup>9</sup> Against the “pathology” or “social disease” as which queerness is diagnosed, queer-baiting of children, Edelman argues, functions as a form of “antigay immunization,” while the narrative of *A Christmas Carol* serves as an annual “booster shot” (*No Future* 143; 19; 49).

These repetitive references to disability suggest that disability, along with irony and queerness, might be another name for what Edelman calls “the remainder of the Real internal to the Symbolic order” (*No Future* 25). Indeed, disability metaphors often seem to be the closest approximations to a name for the “unnamable” that Lacan posits as the death drive. The terms Edelman uses to describe the death drive include “wound,” “fracture,” “stupid enjoyment,” “mindless violence,” “lifeless machinery,” “senseless compulsion,” “disfiguration,” and a “shutdown of life’s vital machinery” (*No Future* 22; “Kid” 28; *No Future* 38; 23; 27; 38; 37; 44). Although these signifiers do not directly refer to specific impairments, they do, taken together, evoke the physical and mental injury and dysfunction as which disability is commonly understood.

And then there is Edelman’s term “*sinthomosexuality*,” a neologism formed by “grafting, at an awkward join,” the word “sexuality” onto Lacan’s term “*sinthome*.” Lacan’s “*sinthome*” is an archaic way of spelling “symptom” (qtd. in Edelman, *No Future* 33). The etymology of Edelman’s term, then, is something like “symptom-sexuality.” However, the Lacanian “*sinthome*” means more than simply “symptom”; as Edelman explains, it refers to “the particular way each subject manages to knot together the orders of the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real” (*No Future* 35). The *sinthome* is the only means by which the subject can access the Symbolic order of meaning production; but paradoxically, because of its “stubborn particularity” (each subject’s *sinthome* is as individual and as meaningless as a fingerprint), its unintelligibility or untranslatability, the *sinthome* also threatens the Symbolic order to which it provides access (Edelman, *No Future* 6; 36).

Both this access and this threat are figured as disability. In order to be constituted as a subject and to take one's place within the Symbolic order, one must be metaphorically blind: the cost of subjectivity is "blindness to this determination by the sinthome," "blindness to the arbitrary fixation of enjoyment responsible for [the subject's] consistency," "blindness" to the functioning of the sinthome (Edelman, *No Future* 36; 38). The alternative to subjectivity as disability would be, according to Lacan, "radical psychotic autism" (qtd. in Edelman, *No Future* 37). That is, whatever might alleviate our constitutive "blindness" by exposing "the sinthome as meaningless knot" must effect a "disfiguration," the consequences of which would be "pure autism" (Žižek 81, qtd. in Edelman, *No Future* 38). On the one side, blindness; on the other, disfiguration, psychosis, autism: when it comes to recognizing the senselessness of one's sinthome, it seems we're disabled if we do, disabled if we don't.

All this is enough to make one wonder why the death drive—which has less to do with literal death than with figuring a strange persistence of life in death, or of death in life (perhaps like the "living death," or "life not worth living," of which disability is often supposed to consist)—is not called the "disability drive." Writing of the contingency of disability as an identity category, Michael Bérubé observes: "Any of us who identify as 'nondisabled' must know that our self-designation is inevitably temporary, and that a car crash, a virus, a degenerative genetic disease, or a precedent-setting legal decision could change our status in ways over which we have no control whatsoever. If it is obvious why most nondisabled people resist this line of thinking, it should be equally obvious why that resistance must somehow be overcome" (viii). Might part of this resistance be attributable to a fear that, in the car crash or other identity-shattering event, it might be the driver's own hand that makes that disabling turn; that is, that the driver might be driven by an impulse, unwanted and unconscious, toward something beyond the principles of pleasure and health? Adding the name "disability drive" to the terms for this "beyond" might enable us to understand the means by which images of disability seem so powerfully to both excite and repel, to become, as Tobin Siebers writes, "sources of fear and fascination for able-bodied people, who cannot bear to look at the unruly sight before them but also cannot bear not to look" ("Disability in Theory" 178).

Signs of a disability drive may be manifested in Edelman's discussion of Tiny Tim. Take, for example, Edelman's contention that "the pleasurable fantasy of survival" in Dickens's story requires the survival of the fantasy that Tiny Tim

“does not excite an ardent fear (or is it a fearful ardor?) to see him . . . at last cash in his chips” (*No Future* 45). It’s a familiar cultural fantasy: cure ’em (as Dickens might hope) or kill ’em (as Edelman suggests readers must secretly wish). In this unacknowledged wish, however, there may be more at stake than either killing or curing. In the chapter that follows his reading of *A Christmas Carol*, Edelman adduces Lacan’s discussion of the legend of Saint Martin, who was said to have cut his own cloak in two in order to give half of it to a beggar. “Perhaps,” Lacan suggests, “over and above that need to be clothed, [the beggar] was begging for something else, namely that Saint Martin either kill him or fuck him” (qtd. in Edelman, *No Future* 83). Drawing upon this passage in his analysis of *North by Northwest*, Edelman proposes that as Leonard (played by Martin Landau) attempts to push Cary Grant’s Roger Thornhill to his death from atop Mount Rushmore, he “enacts . . . the one [killing] as displacement of the other [fucking]” (*No Future* 85). Killing as displacement of fucking: might a similar displacement be at work in Edelman’s attribution, to Dickens’s readers, of a “fearful ardor” to see Tiny Tim “at last cash in his chips” (*No Future* 45)?

As evidence for this suggestion, take the mode by which Edelman introduces his discussion of *A Christmas Carol*: “Take Tiny Tim, *please!*,” “with a nod to the spirit of the late Henny Youngman” renders Tiny Tim wifelike—clearly undesirable in this context, but not wholly uneroticized (*No Future* 41). And then there is the word “take,” which, particularly when followed by the word “please,” as it is here, has a meaning other than the ones Edelman seems deliberately to invoke: “take” means “fuck,” and so Edelman’s directive to “Take Tiny Tim, *please!*,” which echoes his earlier injunction to “fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net,” seems to authorize an additional imperative: fuck Tiny Tim. “Fuck” here means, of course, “remove” or “the hell with,” but it also means fuck.<sup>10</sup>

And don’t these two ways in which *No Future* says “fuck Tiny Tim” coincide with what disability theory most ardently desires? “Fuck Tiny Tim, *please!*”: rid us, please, of this most reviled textual creation. And also: if it is our cultural mandate to embody this pitiable, platitude-issuing, infantilized, and irritating figure—well, then fuck us, every one. Fuck us because figuratively, we are already “so fucked” by our culture’s insistence, through this figure, that the disabled are not fuckable. And this insistence, *No Future* gives us the tools to understand, must be understood as a displacement; propelling every cultural representation of disability as undesirable, I propose, is a “fearful ardor,” an unacknowledged drive.

## IS SEX DISABILITY?

Sex, linguistic convention suggests, is inseparable from disability: we speak of being blinded by love or going mad with desire; we say we suffer from lovesickness and succumb to fits of passion. Lust renders us dizzy and weak in the knees. In the throes of desire, we tremble, stammer, forget our words, and lose our memories. But in other ways, common sense indicates that sex is *not* disability: a sensory impairment is not the same as an orgasm; a building without ramps is not equivalent to the merging of bodies in sexual acts; the experience of chronic pain differs from the sensation of a first kiss with a new lover. Such literal correspondences are not what I have in mind when I ask, as I do in the remainder of this chapter, whether sex “is” disability. In particular, I wish to be clear that I am not suggesting, as Freud claimed, that individuals become sick or disabled as a means of fulfilling unconscious desires. On the contrary, I consider Freud’s theories of “primary gain” (according to which ill people derive erotic enjoyment from their ailments) and “secondary gain” (in which disability is desired because it confers social rewards) as themselves symptomatic of the disability drive, that is, of the ways in which, in the cultural imagination (or unconscious), disability is *fantasized* in terms of a loss of self, of mastery, integrity, and control, a loss that, both desired and feared, is indissociable from sexuality.

This argument is analogous to those Edelman makes in relation to queerness. Noting that our culture ascribes to queer sexualities an intrinsic murderousness and suicidality (as evident in some right-wing commentators’ assertions that male homosexuality constitutes “a culture of death,” a natural outcome of which is serial killing),<sup>11</sup> Edelman advocates more than a simple refutation: “Without ceasing to refute the lies that pervade these familiar right-wing diatribes,” he asks, “do we also have the courage to acknowledge, and even to embrace, their correlative truths?” (*No Future* 40; 22). For Edelman, these “correlative truths” are twofold: *all* sexuality is destructive, not in the sense of effecting literal death, but in the threat it poses to the integrity of the subject and thus to the social order; and for this reason queers, onto whom the dominant culture projects the destructive aspects of sexuality it refuses to acknowledge in itself, should welcome their association with the death drive. Edelman thus responds to a minoritizing, essentializing, and homophobic formulation (gay men as murderers) not through disavowal (really, our sexuality is gentle and loving) but through a nuanced reworking of it (all sexuality is destructive in complicated ways that should be embraced).

I take a similar tack in my argument about a disability drive, a term that I posit not as a name for a new “instinct” that could empirically be validated or disproved, but as another appellation for—and thus another way of understanding—what psychoanalysis calls the death drive. At the same time that I contest the widespread ableist and minoritizing assumption that people with chronic pain and illness enjoy and perhaps even cause their impairments, I also ask: what would it mean to embrace this assumption’s “correlative truths”? As a way of beginning this exploration, I turn to Bersani’s essay, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” Published in 1987, during the early years of the AIDS pandemic, this still highly influential essay seeks to understand the phobic, hostile, and blaming attitudes directed at gay men during this time. These attitudes, of course, remain in play today. Indeed, I would propose that “Is the Rectum a Grave?” should be considered a key text for contemporary disability theory. Although Bersani’s essay doesn’t employ terms such as “ableism” or “disability,” it powerfully articulates connections between ableism and homophobia; that is, it analyzes the ways in which ableism—manifested here as a murderous hatred directed at people with a particular impairment—has “legitimized” an unleashing of “homophobic rage” (“Rectum” 28; 19).

Drawing on psychoanalytic theory in order to account for this convergence of ableism and homophobia, Bersani asks why, in dominant cultural discourses about AIDS, gay men are represented as “killers” (“Rectum” 17). This question brings up issues that intersect both with Edelman’s concerns in *No Future* (gay men as murderers) and those I am raising here (disabled people as blameable for impairments ostensibly resulting from perverse sexual enjoyment). “What is it exactly,” Bersani asks, “that makes [gay men] killers?” (“Rectum” 17). “Everyone agrees that the crime is sexual,” but “the imagined or real promiscuity for which gay men are so famous,” Bersani suggests, may be less important than cultural fantasies surrounding anal sex: “Women and gay men spread their legs with an unquenchable appetite for destruction. This is an image with extraordinary power; and if the good citizens of Arcadia, Florida could chase from their midst an average, law-abiding family, it is, I would suggest, because in looking at three hemophiliac children they may have seen—that is, unconsciously represented—the infinitely more seductive and intolerable image of a grown man, legs high in the air, unable to refuse the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman” (“Rectum” 18).<sup>12</sup>

“But why ‘suicidal’?” In part, Bersani proposes, because “*To be penetrated is to abdicate power*” (“Rectum” 19; emphasis in original). Writing against what he refers to as “the *redemptive reinvention of sex*,” Bersani contests the common

assumption that sexuality is “in its essence, less disturbing, less socially abrasive, less violent, more respectful of ‘personhood’ than it has been in a male-dominated, phallogocentric culture” (“Rectum” 22; emphasis in original). This notion, Bersani argues, informs an entire range of positions on “the battlefield of sexual politics,” from antipornography activism to celebrations of bathhouses and SM (“Rectum” 22). Against this redemptive project—a project inspired, he maintains, by a “profound *moral revulsion* with sex”—Bersani asserts that sex is, “at least in certain of its ineradicable aspects—anticommunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving” (“Rectum” 22; emphasis in original). Eschewing redemption, Bersani asks, as Edelman does in *No Future*, what it would mean to insist upon, and even to celebrate, sexuality’s imbrications with the death drive: “if the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal . . . of proud subjectivity is buried, then it should be celebrated for its very potential for death”—not the biological death brought about by AIDS, but rather “the risk of self-dismissal, of *losing sight* of the self” (“Rectum” 29; 30; emphasis in original). Sex, Bersani argues, threatens “the sacrosanct value of selfhood, a value that accounts for human beings’ extraordinary willingness to kill in order to protect the seriousness of their statements” (“Rectum” 30).

This argument is highly relevant to disability theory, not only because Bersani articulates it here in relation to AIDS phobia but also because—even more important for my purposes in this chapter—much of what Bersani claims that sexuality ineradicably “is” could be understood as disability. This can be seen, for instance, in Bersani’s argument that “a gravely *dysfunctional* aspect of what is, after all, the *healthy pleasure* we take in the operation of a *coordinated and strong* physical organism is the temptation to deny the perhaps equally strong appeal of *powerlessness*, of the *loss of control*” (“Rectum” 23–24; emphasis added). In this formulation, what might be termed able-bodiedness (health, pleasure, coordination, strength) seems, on the one hand, to be opposed to terms commonly associated with disability (“powerlessness,” “loss of control”) but, on the other hand, to be itself disabling (there is a “gravely dysfunctional”—or, we might say, “severely disabled”—“aspect” of this “healthy pleasure”).<sup>13</sup> Similarly to Edelman, Bersani seems to be arguing that what stabilizes and gives coherence to the subject is in a sense disabling (metaphorically “blind” for Edelman, literally “dysfunctional” for Bersani) and yet, paradoxically, that these disabling congealments of identity serve as defenses against a more radically disintegrating force, which I have been calling the disability drive, in which sexuality and disability begin to merge.

In *The Freudian Body* (which was published in 1986, one year before “Is the

Rectum a Grave?"), Bersani argues that "the most radical originality of psychoanalysis . . . has to do with a *disabled* consciousness" (6; emphasis in original). The "*disabled*" aspect of consciousness to which Bersani refers is sexual; psychoanalytic theory and therapy resist, but cannot escape enacting, "the devastating pleasures of an eroticized" and "inherently dysfunctional consciousness" (*Freudian* 6). This eroticized and dysfunctional (or sexual and disabled) consciousness is manifested in "a certain type of failure in Freud's thought," which Bersani wants to "celebrate" in *The Freudian Body* (3). This "failure," or "theoretical collapse," Bersani figures as disability: "psychoanalytic reflection on desire," he writes, is "paralyzed" and "madly excessive"; a "beneficent discursive paralysis—or at the very least, a beneficent discursive stammering" is "at the heart of Freudian discourse" (*Freudian* 5; 31). Such beneficent symptoms appear, Bersani argues, when what Freud wants to be saying about topics such as sexuality and the death drive comes into conflict with the conclusions to which, apparently despite his intentions, his arguments seem to be leading.

This can be seen, for instance, in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, in which Freud's teleological argument (according to which orality and anality are stages of development on the road to a mature heterogeneity) is undermined by a competing characterization of sexuality that Bersani draws out, according to which the "abortive, incomplete, and undeveloped beginnings of our sexual life constitute and exhaust its essence" (*Freudian* 40). This "abortive, incomplete and undeveloped" "essence" of sexuality can be understood as disability; it refers to what Bersani calls a "biologically dysfunctional process of maturation" in which "we desire what nearly shatters us" (*Freudian* 39). According to the strand of thought that Bersani isolates in Freud, "the pleasurable unpleasurable tension of sexual excitement occurs when the body's 'normal' range of sensation is exceeded, and when the organization of the self is momentarily disturbed" (*Freudian* 38). Thus, "sexuality would be that which is intolerable to the structured self" (*Freudian* 38). "Sexual pleasure enters the Freudian scheme," Bersani quotes Jean Laplanche as noting, "within the suffering position" (qtd. in *Freudian* 41). "The *mystery* of sexuality is that we seek not only to get rid of this shattering tension but also to repeat, even to increase it" (*Freudian* 38; emphasis in original). For this reason, Bersani famously asserts, "sexuality . . . could be thought of as a tautology for masochism" (*Freudian* 39).

Might it also be thought of as a tautology for disability? Disability, not necessarily in any phenomenological or ontological sense, but rather as it is commonly figured: as "undeveloped," "abortive," or "unpleasurable," as "loss of self,"



“failure,” “dysfunction,” “collapse,” the “suffering position.” Sex is disability: we desire what nearly shatters us; we desire what disables us. But, it might be objected, doesn’t such a claim derive from precisely the model of disability that we should be contesting? After all, disability scholars and activists have insisted that disability is *not* failure, dysfunction, loss, or suffering—that instead it is merely a form of physical or mental difference—or rather, that it is the social process by which benign human variations are stigmatized *as* failure, loss, or lack. And so one might argue that, in the interests of upholding this redefinition, we should critique, rather than embrace, Bersani’s and Edelman’s uses of disability as metaphor for these abjected states.

Is it possible, though, that the project of reinventing disability as difference rather than suffering or loss is informed by a “*moral revulsion*” not unlike that which inspires the “*redemptive reinvention of sex*” that Bersani critiques (“Rectum” 22; emphasis in original)? The “redemptive reinvention of sex,” like the redefinition of disability I have been describing, emphasizes the value of diversity. “The revulsion,” Bersani characterizes this project as arguing in relation to gay male sexuality, “is all a big mistake: what we’re really up to is pluralism and diversity, and getting buggered is just one moment in the practice of those laudable humanistic virtues” (“Rectum” 26). Or: the pity and fear are all a big mistake; what we’re really embodying is variation and difference, and suffering and loss, if they are present at all, are insignificant aspects of the disability experience.

It “is perhaps necessary,” Bersani writes, “to accept the pain of embracing, at least provisionally, a homophobic representation of homosexuality” (“Rectum” 15). Might we consider, analogously, embracing a representation of disability that some would consider ableist? “Sex” and “disability,” I am arguing, can be read in psychoanalytic discourse as two names for, or perhaps two sides of, the same process: that which Bersani calls “the terrifying appeal of a loss of the ego, of a self-debasement” (“Rectum” 27). Although we are more likely to call that which is “terrifying” about this “self-debasement” disability and that which is appealing “sex,” the profound imbrication of these two terms is evident in the multiple instances in Bersani’s and Edelman’s work (and in the writing of Freud, Lacan, Laplanche, and others whom they cite) in which disability is called upon to figure the self-rupturing aspects of sex. The “redemptive reinvention of sex” denies this imbrication, seeking to move sex away from disability as it is commonly understood (“what nearly shatters us”); a redemptive reinvention of disability may move disability away from sex, at least as sex is understood in psychoanalytic accounts (“that which is intolerable to the structured self”) (Bersani, *Freudian*

39; 38). Therefore, if revulsion or disavowal characterize our responses to constructions of disability as that which debases or nearly shatters our selves—that is, if we insist instead on our personhood and pride—we may risk contributing to an already pervasive cultural desexualization of disability. And in refusing sex as disability, we also risk obscuring what Bersani perceives as “the inestimable value of sex” (and, I would add, of disability): the threat they pose to the integrity of the self, or ego, in defense of which humans have been so willing to kill (“Rectum” 22). Moreover, in seeking to cast off stigma, in asserting proud disabled identities, the “best” we can hope for may be, to adapt Edelman’s words, “shifting the figural burden of [disability] to someone else” (*No Future* 28).

Edelman, as we have seen, posits queerness as the name for the “*structural position*” that bears the burden of figuring the negativity of the death drive (*No Future* 27; emphasis in original). This structural position could also be understood as disability. Indeed, sex—or, more precisely, the negativity that Bersani and Edelman each describe as inhering in sexuality—is, their work makes clear, always also disability: the stammering, paralysis, autism, blindness, psychosis, deafness, dysfunction, loss, lack, suffering, incompleteness, and disease as which, in their writing and the psychoanalytic discourse that informs it, this negativity is repeatedly figured.

#### **PITIALE OR DISREPUTABLE**

I wish to be clear that the argument I am making about the disability drive is not a minoritizing one, according to which some people (whom we call masochists) find disability erotic—or, conversely, some people (whom we call disabled) are secretly masochistic. Rather than thinking of sex and disability primarily in relation to identities (such as the masochist or the disabled person), I want to examine the ways in which these identity categories function to cordon off, as the particular concerns of a minority group, what I am arguing are better understood as ubiquitous mergings of sex and disability. Reading the disability drive in this way, I suggest, may have important implications for how disability is understood in a range of contexts, including those not immediately legible as “sexual.” In particular, the concept of the disability drive may provide a way of responding to problems that have beset disability studies’ construction of disability as a minority identity.

This construction, in its emphasis on visible difference and its downplaying of suffering, has sometimes had the effect of marginalizing invisible impairment

and illness, as writers such as Samuels, Liz Crow, and Susan Wendell have observed.<sup>14</sup> Chronic illness, pain, and depression, according to these writers, don't always conform to disability studies' dominant models. Indeed, they may even seem to contradict them. For example, people with chronic pain, rather than contending with maudlin displays of pity, must often labor to convince others that they are genuinely suffering, not just "looking for attention."

These critiques persuasively demonstrate a need to differentiate between common cultural responses to disabling illness (which is often "invisible") and visible disability (which often does not involve sickness). Interestingly, though, even some forms of visible bodily difference don't quite fit disability studies' foundational paradigms. For example, fat people are less likely to be pitied as victims suffering from a tragic disease than to be blamed for "overeating" and other forms of self-indulgence.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the question of blame seems crucial here: in which contexts are disabled people regarded as victims, and in which are they seen as agents, of their impairments? With this question in mind, I propose that alongside arguments distinguishing between illness and bodily difference, or between visible and invisible disability, we might consider, as an additional heuristic, a distinction between representations of disability as "pitiable" or as "disreputable."

Disability studies has had much to say about figurations of disability as pitiable, in which unwanted sympathy precludes recognition of any enjoyment disabled people might find in lives assumed to be "not worth living." The field has had less to say about an inverse process, often operating in relation to disabilities that contemporary culture deems disreputable, in which sympathy that may be desired (as well as accommodation) is withheld from disabled people who are blamed for impairments imagined to derive from "unhealthy" enjoyments (e.g., fatness, alcoholism, addiction, HIV, AIDS, psychiatric disability, or chronic illness with no clearly defined medical cause).<sup>16</sup> Yet these apparently divergent cultural responses to disability—imaged as precluding enjoyment or, alternatively, as deriving from excessive enjoyment—are shown to be interconnected when, reading sex and disability together, we understand the enjoyment in question as erotic—and when, using the concept of the disability drive, we take measure of the complex ways in which the eroticism infusing cultural figurations of disability circulates. Pervasive cultural fantasies of (pitiable) disability as foreclosing possibilities of pleasure, and of (disreputable) disability as arising from indulgence in destructive pleasure, have something crucial in common: they each eroticize disability (or, we might say, they fantasize it in sexual ways), and they

each do so without acknowledging the enjoyment such fantasies afford to those who indulge them.

Take, for example, the father of psychoanalysis, who is also a likely progenitor of the “it’s all in your head” skepticism that many people with chronic illness or pain confront. Where “hysteria is found,” Freud asserts, “there can be no question of ‘innocence of mind’” (*Dora* 42). Thus, his patient Elizabeth von R. appears to experience a “voluptuous tickling sensation” when Freud touches her painful leg (*Studies* 137); Dora’s sore throats derive from a history of childhood masturbation and an unconscious desire to fellate her father; and Freud suggests that the nosebleeds of another patient are due to her “longing” for him (qtd. in Masson 101; emphasis Freud’s). In what might be interpreted as the analyst’s desire for his disabled patients to desire him, we can discern signs of a disability drive. That is, what might appear as merely a stubborn refusal, on Freud’s part, to allow for any distinction between his patients’ disabilities and their sexualities may point us to the stubbornness of a drive—a drive that insists, as we have seen, on the indissectability of sex and disability. And I suggest that the enjoyment such a drive may afford—notwithstanding Freud’s oft-quoted protestation that he is “simply claim[ing] for [him]self the rights of the gynaecologist,” not “gratifying sexual desires”—is by no means confined to the “hysterics” (or their contemporary correlatives as “somatizers” or “hypochondriacs”) whose bodies and minds are made to figure this indissectability (*Dora* 3).

Sex as disability, figured as the pathology of a disabled minority, can be made to signify a sexualized disreputability, in regard not only to “hysterics” or “hypochondriacs,” whose deviant desires can putatively be read on their bodies, but also to those termed “promiscuous,” “addicted,” “compulsive,” or “queer,” who are blamed for “spreading AIDS”; the “obese” or “overweight,” who supposedly can’t get enough of the food they are said to substitute for sex; and the “mentally unstable,” whose sexual urges, it is feared, are unchecked by “normal” inhibitions. Paradoxically, though, sex as disability also infuses the minoritizing construction of disability as pitiable. “I know what they’re all thinking. My dick doesn’t work,” John Hockenberry writes (87). He recounts being asked by a flight attendant: “I guess you are the first handicapped person I have ever seen up close. Have you ever thought of killing yourself?” The airline worker then voices “her other big question”: “Can you, I mean, can your body, I mean are you able to do it with a woman?” (Hockenberry 97).

The flight attendant’s excited questioning evinces signs of the disability drive, which we might also refer to as a compulsion toward, to adapt Bersani’s words,

“the suicidal ecstasy of being [disabled]” (“Rectum” 18). Disability, it seems, is erotically charged, even (or especially) when it is imagined to negate the possibility of sexual enjoyment. Indeed, the argument I have been making, that sex in some ways “is” disability—that is, that “sex” and “disability” often serve as different signifiers for the same self-disintegrating force—enables us to perceive elements of sexual fantasy in the familiar statement, “I’d kill myself if I were disabled.”

### DISABLING “THE HUMAN”

Not wishing to be seen as either disreputable or pitiable, disabled people have protested: those with chronic fatigue, chronic pain, or chemical sensitivity insist that their impairments have biological, rather than psychosocial, causes; wheelchair users explain that they value and enjoy their lives; blind or deaf people reiterate that they don’t necessarily long to see or hear; some people with psychiatric disabilities emphasize that theirs is an organic disease of the brain, not an alibi for laziness or other character flaws, while others argue against the construction of “mental illness” as a category of disease. Taken together, each of these ways of reframing disability can be seen as participating in a broader project, articulated by disability studies and the disability rights movement, of allowing disabled people to be recognized as human beings (rather than merely the objects of the dominant culture’s fantasies, sexual or otherwise). Hence, the title of the Berkeley poet and journalist Mark O’Brien’s autobiography: *How I Became a Human Being*. O’Brien’s answer to the question his book’s title implies is unequivocal: it was the disability rights movement that enabled him to escape “the living death of nursing homes” and to be treated, for the first time, “as a human being” (*Human Being* 3; 4).

But here a problem emerges: as we have seen, the writing by Bersani and Edelman that I have examined forwards powerful arguments against the project of becoming human. Urging queers to embrace the “inhumanity of the *sinthomo*-sexual,” Edelman observes that the liberal goal of expanding the category of “human” to encompass those presently excluded from it will not “stop the cultural production of figures” made to embody the inhumanity of the death drive (*No Future* 107).

What would it mean for disability theory to embrace disabled people’s figuration as inhuman? As we contemplate this possibility, a moment from *How I Became a Human Being* may give us pause. After a presentation by the physi-

cist Stephen Hawking at the U.C. Berkeley campus, O'Brien posed the following question: "Doctor Hawking, what can you say to all the disabled people who are stuck in nursing homes or living with their parents or in some other untenable situation and who feel that their life is over, that they have no future?" (*Human Being* 230). A response that might be derived from Edelman's book—that there is, and can be, no future, since the future, by definition, can only ever be a fantasy ("always / A day / Away," in Annie's paean to "Tomorrow")—hardly seems more adequate than Hawking's reply: "All I can say is that one must do the best one can in the situation in which one finds oneself" (*No Future* 30; *Human Being* 231).

In light of O'Brien's question, Edelman's embrace of the death drive, or Bersani's celebration of what he calls "the breakdown of the human itself in sexual intensities," can easily appear as irresponsible theoretical indulgences ("Rectum" 29). Indeed, the word "irresponsible" is one that Bersani himself uses when he reflects, at a distance of thirteen years, on "Is the Rectum a Grave?": "Much of this now seems to me a rather facile, even irresponsible celebration of 'self-defeat.' Masochism is not a viable alternative to mastery, either practically or theoretically" ("Sociality" 110). This remark highlights important shifts and ambivalences in Bersani's thinking over the course of his career, which may serve as an entry into the question of the status of the human in disability theory.

Bersani and Edelman are often cited, as if in the same breath, as proponents of an "antisocial" or "antirelational" "thesis" in queer theory, in opposition to which some critics of their work, such as Muñoz, have defined their own projects as "utopian."<sup>17</sup> But Bersani's work, rather than conforming to either side of a utopian/antirelational binary, often reveals an interest in thinking in both of these ways at once. For example, writing of passages in his book, *Homos* (published in 1995) that are frequently cited as the origin of the "antirelational thesis," Bersani describes the "performance of antirelationality" that he celebrates in Jean Genet's *Funeral Rites* as a "utopic form of revolt" ("Sociality" 103; emphasis added). This joining of the utopian and the antirelational corresponds to what Bersani describes, in an essay published in 2004, as a central concern throughout his career: "a dialogue (both conciliatory and antagonistic) between" Foucault and Freud ("Fr-oucault" 133). In this essay and other recent writings, Bersani moves away from the "Freudian" and toward the "Foucauldian." Worrying that the psychoanalytic (or antirelational) side of this paradigm may be politically irresponsible (insofar as its insistence on the intractability of the death drive seems "resistant

to any social transformations whatsoever”), Bersani has become increasingly interested in the creation of what, invoking a phrase of Foucault’s, he calls “new relational modes” (“Fr-oucault” 134).

Interestingly, this “admittedly utopic” project often employs a rhetoric of futurism, both reproductive and rehabilitative (Bersani, “Fr-oucault” 134). For example, in a reading of Plato’s *Symposium*, Bersani approvingly observes that “the goal of a love relation with Socrates” is “the bringing to term of the other’s pregnancy of soul” (“Sociality” 110; 117).<sup>18</sup> Not only a pregnancy but perhaps also a rehabilitation of the soul is at stake at moments in which a utopian impulse is evident in Bersani’s work—as when, for example, he speaks of effecting “a *curative* collapse of social difference,” or of enabling a future enjoyment of “as yet unarticulated pleasures” that have thus far been “suppressed and *crippled*” (*Homos* 177; “Fr-oucault” 137; emphasis added).

If, as these examples suggest, Edelman is correct in asserting that we cannot think of the future without reference to the Child—and if I am right in suggesting that the overlapping ideology of rehabilitative futurism is equally pervasive and insidious—then how *should* disability theory answer O’Brien’s question? The disability rights movement, of course, has already provided compelling responses: protestations against the injustice of institutionalization, critiques of the nursing home lobby, and advocacy for attendant programs. Theoretically, it could be said that the goal of de-institutionalization is merely a liberal one, as it aims only to include disabled people within the social fabric. Yet in this instance (and many similar ones), an imperfect politics clearly seems better than no politics at all.

But what is the role of disability *theory* in relation to this politics? Is it, as Paul Longmore described disability studies in 2003, to serve as the “academic counterpart to disability rights advocacy” (*Burned* 2)? Or should disability theory conceive of itself as sometimes in tension with this movement (as queer theory often is in relation to the mainstream LGBT movement)? Insofar as it has acted as a “counterpart” to the disability rights movement, disability studies has made crucial contributions to what might be called a humanizing enterprise. It has offered, for example, myriad analyses of the reasons for our society’s willingness—its desperation, even—to dehumanize and exclude disabled people, even to the point of locking them up.

But when sex enters the picture, things get complicated. Consider, for example, the following remark, made by a doctor to a group of patients at one of

O'Brien's rehabilitation hospitals: "You may think you'll never have sex again, but remember . . . some people do become people again" (*Human Being* 80). The doctor's comment points to a paradox that inheres in any conversation about sex and disability: disabled people, it is implied here, are less than fully human because they are presumed not to "have sex"—but sex, psychoanalysis shows us, is radically *dehumanizing*, effecting a "shattering" of "the structured self" rather than its entrenchment in personhood or identity. This paradox is at the root of the double bind I discussed in the introduction to this chapter, in which disability simultaneously figures sexual excess and sexual lack: disabled people are regarded as sexually deficient and therefore not fully human, but at the same time, disabled people register as less than human because disability is the ubiquitous figure for a dehumanizing, identity-disintegrating force that resembles sex.

If, as the second half of this paradoxical construction suggests, assertions of humanity are in necessary conflict with expressions of sexuality, then perhaps disability theory should, rather than seeking to humanize the disabled (insisting that disabled people be treated "as human beings"), instead ask how disability might threaten to undo, or disable, the category of the human. It might do so in part by attending to the insights Bersani's and Edelman's readings of psychoanalytic theory yield, according to which sex, far from enabling us to "become people," ruptures the self and dehumanizes us all.

But what, then, would become of disability politics? Critics of *No Future*—despite Edelman's insistence that its argument pertains to "figural-ity," not to "being or becoming" the death drive—tend to read the book as advocating, on a literal level, the abandonment of hope and political goals (*No Future* 17; 25).<sup>19</sup> As noted earlier, however, it is "politics *as we know it*" that Edelman refuses, and even this refusal does not mean that queers should stop insisting on "our equal right to the social order's prerogatives" (*No Future* 3; 29; emphasis added). Edelman further clarifies this point in his essay "Ever After": "Without for a moment denying the importance that distinguishes many [political] projects, I want to insist on the need for an ongoing counterproject *as well*: a project that's willing to forgo the privilege of social recognition" (473; emphasis added).

Such a counterproject—one that can be read as possibly opposing the humanizing impulse behind O'Brien's narration of *How I Became a Human Being*—may take shape in some of O'Brien's own poetry. While the title of his autobiography speaks of becoming human, his unpublished poem "Femininity" disrupts this trajectory. O'Brien writes of lying:



Naked on the gurney  
in the hospital corridor,  
surrounded by nurses,  
tall, young, proud of their beauty,  
admiring my skinny cripple body.  
“You’re so thin,  
you should’ve been a girl.”  
“I wish my eyelashes  
were as long as yours.”  
“Such pretty eyes.”  
I thought  
or think I thought  
or wish I’d said,  
“But your bodies work.  
Get scissors,  
cut my cock and balls off.  
Make me a girl,  
without anaesthesia,  
make me a girl,  
make me a girl.”<sup>20</sup>

Much of the unnerving intensity of these lines derives from what, invoking Bersani, we might refer to as their embrace of “the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman” (or a girl, or queer, or disabled); from their rejection, that is, of the ideology of rehabilitative futurism, and from their refusal to engage in a “redemptive re-invention” of sex or disability. O’Brien’s speaker does not plead with the nurses who admire his “skinny cripple body” to “cure me” or “make me walk again.” Nor does he attempt to redefine his body (which does not “work”) as merely a manifestation of human variation. Suffering and lack, rather than being dissociated from disability, are amplified and eroticized: “cut my cock and balls off . . . without anaesthesia,” the speaker implores, the repetition of his plea (“make me a girl, / make me a girl”) evoking the repetitiveness of a drive.

“Femininity” can indeed be read as an instantiation of the disability drive: disability in this poem, like “the rectum” in Bersani’s essay, “is the grave in which the masculine [and nondisabled] ideal of proud subjectivity is buried.” It will of course be tempting to evade this “nightmare of ontological obscenity” (“Rec-

tum” 29), this fantasy of *un*-becoming human.<sup>21</sup> But the dehumanizing double binds that so persistently structure cultural representations of sex and disability suggest that such evasions may be futile. Intrinsically obscene, yet inherently asexual: rather than attempting to assume a different position within this impossible paradigm, disability theory should perhaps underscore its pervasiveness as evidence of a disability drive; as a sign, that is, that our culture’s desexualization of disabled people functions to defend against a deeply rooted but seldom acknowledged awareness that all sex is incurably, and perhaps desirably, disabled.

## NOTES

This chapter benefited greatly from thoughtful comments from Robert McRuer, Ellen Samuels, and Joshua J. Weiner.

1. See Michel Desjardins’s and Michelle Jarman’s chapters in this volume for discussions of social perceptions of cognitively disabled people’s sexualities.

2. For a thorough discussion of the sexual politics of “amputee devoteeism,” see Alison Kafer’s chapter in this volume, as well as her essays “Amputated Desire, Resistant Desire: Female Amputees in the Devotee Community” and “Inseparable: Constructing Gender through Disability in the Amputee-Devotee Community.”

3. Barbara Faye Waxman-Fiduccia discusses websites that equate disability with kinkiness (“Sexual”). For a personal narrative about his friends’ assumptions that his spinal cord injury rendered him “sexually dead,” see Hooper.

4. To take up influential arguments in queer theory regarding the self-rupturing aspects of sex—as well as disability, I propose in this chapter—would move disability theory away from the identity politics that has predominated in disability studies. The status of identity politics in the field is a central concern in two recent books that each contain the word “theory” in their titles: Robert McRuer’s *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* and Tobin Siebers’s *Disability Theory* offer two contrasting accounts of what crip and disability theory should look like. Disability theory, as I construe it in this chapter, has more in common with McRuer’s “crip theory,” which entails a critique of liberal identity politics, than with Siebers’s “disability theory,” which involves “a defense of identity politics” (*Disability Theory* 14). In this chapter I retain the term “disability” (although I do also like “crip”), because I appreciate its grammatical negativity (“dis”) and because, in different ways from “crip” (which, despite its increasingly flexible uses, does nonetheless, as it derives from “cripple,” seem to privilege certain forms of impairment), “disability” has an extremely expansive definitional capacity. For a critique of Siebers’s earlier arguments in favor of identity politics, see my essay “Disability Studies and Identity Politics: A Critique of Recent Theory.”

5. “Laws with capital *ls*” refers to former Boston Cardinal Bernard Law’s contention

that health care benefits should be denied to same-sex partners of city employees on the grounds that “society has a special interest in the protection, care and upbringing of children” (qtd. in Edelman, *No Future* 29).

6. Halberstam seems to imply this when she writes, in her blurb of Muñoz’s book: “Muñoz insists that for some queers, particularly queers of color, hope is something one cannot afford to lose and for them giving up on futurity is not an option.”

7. Muñoz’s response to *No Future* was part of an MLA panel in 2005, “The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory,” that was moderated by Robert Caserio and also included Edelman, Halberstam, and Tim Dean. The panelists’ positions were published the following year in *PMLA*.

8. The online journal *Bent*, which features “True Stories of Disabled Gay Men,” plays on the dual connotations of this term. For analyses of the inextricability of ableism and homophobia, see McRuer’s *Crip Theory* and Kafer’s “Compulsory Bodies.”

9. Susan Schweik’s *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* offers a thorough analysis of the connections between disability and “ugliness,” as manifested in the “ugly laws” (antivagrancy ordinances that targeted visibly disabled people) in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American cities.

10. Performance artist Greg Walloch’s film, *Fuck the Disabled*, plays on these two meanings of “fuck.”

11. Referring to the serial murders committed by Andrew Cunanan, whose victims were mostly gay men, Gary Bauer and Peter A. Jay each called male homosexuality a “culture of death” (qtd. in Edelman, *No Future* 39–40).

12. Bersani refers to an incident in Arcadia, Florida, in which the house of a family with three hemophiliac children believed to have HIV was set on fire. The community’s hostility toward the family was defended by the town’s mayor and his wife (Bersani, “Rectum” 16–17).

13. See McRuer’s *Crip Theory* for an intriguing argument about the critically queer work that the phrase “severely disabled” might perform (30–31).

14. See Crow; Wendell, “Unhealthy” and *Rejected* (19–22); and Samuels, “My Body.” See also Mollow, “Disability” and “When.”

15. Among fat scholars and activists, there is disagreement as to whether fatness should be included under the rubric of “disability.” See Solovay 128–70.

16. My pairing of the terms “pitiable” and “disreputable” is meant to serve as a flexible heuristic, not a rigid binary; neither term always attaches in predictable ways to any given form of disability. For example, a person with a mobility impairment might be regarded in different contexts (or even simultaneously) as a pitiable victim and/or as the deserving recipient of divine retribution, while someone with a terminal illness might be pitied and/or blamed for “unhealthy lifestyle choices.”

17. See, for example, Muñoz, *Cruising* 11.

18. This observation is part of a series of birthing metaphors Bersani adduces in order to critique aspects of psychoanalysis. Similar metaphors appear in *Homos*, as

when Bersani writes approvingly of Genet's narrator being "orally impregnated" by his lover (178). These images, in conjunction with an emphasis on futurism ("only what society throws off . . . can serve the future") complicate Edelman's characterization of the passage in which they appear as a "profoundly influential analysis of the anticommunalism of eros" (Bersani, *Homos* 180; Edelman, *No Future* 176, n. 30). Also noteworthy in this regard is Bersani's contention that SM "is fully complicit with a culture of death" (*Homos* 97); as noted earlier, in another context Edelman forcefully critiques the uses of the phrase "a culture of death" to describe queer sexualities (see note 11 above and *No Future* 39–40).

19. See Halberstam's comment, note 6 above. According to Muñoz, Edelman "recommends that queers give up hope" and advocates "abandoning politics" (*Cruising* 91). Lynne Huffer seems to have *No Future* in mind when she writes, "Call me Pollyanna, but I want a future: not a heteronormatively reproductive future-as-prison, but an erotic, yes-saying queer heterotopia" (186). Such responses, Teresa de Lauretis suggests, do not account for what, in a textured analysis of *No Future*, she describes as the book's "two discursive registers": "the ironic and the literal, the figural and the referential, the literary or speculative register of theory and the empirically or fact-based register of politics" (258).

20. This excerpt was provided by the Mark O'Brien papers, the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

21. An example of a humanizing reading of "Femininity" can be found in Siebers's *Disability Theory*. Siebers provides extended and appreciative analyses of O'Brien's poetry, which are valuable for their nuanced considerations of the poet's complex reworkings of conventional constructions of gender, sexuality, and disability. However, the conclusion to Siebers's discussion of "Femininity" may obscure some of that complexity. "The poem represents disability identity as acceptance of lack," Siebers acknowledges, "but only insofar as lack appears as a marker of sexual power" (*Disability Theory* 173, emphasis added). And, Siebers continues, "The poem understands femininity as symbolic of lack, but only insofar as lack appears specifically as the enactment of sexual attractiveness" (*Disability Theory* 173, emphasis added). Thus, Siebers concludes, "O'Brien uses disability to confuse gender categories with sexual ones for the purpose of rejecting the stereotypical asexuality of disabled people and asserting that they desire to be both sexually active and attractive" (*Disability Theory* 173). In order to make the argument that countering stereotypes and asserting disabled people's power, agency, and attractiveness are central activities of "Femininity," Siebers must attempt to contain the effects of the poem's eroticization of lack (lack is present, according to Siebers, "only insofar as" it indicates sexual attractiveness or power). This reading thus elides some of the most salient aspects of O'Brien's poem: its staging of a "nightmare of ontological obscenity" in which sex and disability come together to negate, or disable, potential assertions of pride, power, and humanity.