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## Queer Monstrosity: Dis/ability, Sexuality, and Gender

Savannah Olivia Aldridge

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

QUEER MONSTROSITY:  
DIS/ABILITY, SEXUALITY, AND GENDER

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF WOMEN'S STUDIES GENDER STUDIES  
PROGRAM IN WOMEN'S STUDIES GENDER STUDIES

BY

VANNAH O. ALDRIDGE

CHICAGO, IL

MAY 2020

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Not only has this been my second master's thesis, but it will be the one that is so unique and intimate to my daily, lived struggle. I am a sex worker who has been in the community for a decade. It was only recently that I worked in a dungeon and met the love of my life. This text is the collaboration of many of the workers that I have done advocacy with, but mostly is with my partner that I met while doing this work. We both had questions of what makes a queer monstrosity: this body of work that is in this thesis and in our veins and broken bodies as queer sex workers with disabilities is a consistent and ever-changing document. I hope that this work brings people with not only our identities, but unique and changing and growing others into a space of validity and safety.

This thesis will be in dedication to my mother, who is homeless doing activism and has been a survival sex worker for the past 2 years and a sex worker for the 20 years prior. Generational sex work was survival, and although this thesis cannot discuss all the complexities of what sex work and disability have in common, I will be continuing and doing this work far past the pages of this thesis. My mother is one of the many reasons I want to make this text readable, accessible, and contextualized for those who live within the bounds of theory: as she has difficulty reading and comprehending because of the intensities of her schizophrenia. If I see her again, I want to make sure that I don't feel as if my theory is

above her. If theory isn't contextualized into action for those who need it most, to me, what's the point?

This research simply wouldn't have been possible without the help and care of a few people here at Loyola University Chicago. My thesis advisor, Dr. Suzanne Bost, who has shown an interest and care in my studies that mean so much to me. Her work in this and her energy are reflected in my language and intention in this work. Dr. Susan Grossman, my advisor, has went above and beyond that to advocate for me throughout my time here. Dr. Hector Garcia, my professor and on my advisory board, whose classes gave me a fresh, beautiful context of what learning means. And Dr. Michael Dentato, who showed an interest in my work at the beginning of my journey here and has continued to influence my studies beyond that. My partner, Dove E.R\* has helped me with countless hours of editing, conversating, and being in academia. I want to thank them for their care and interest with this body of work, but most of all, I want to thank them for their love.

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For of all the pro-Mad, queer folks I love.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BDSM      Bondage Dominance Sadism Masochism

SW          Sex work

## ABSTRACT

The queer monster feeds, yet what does it feed on? What does it look like? Is it considered homosexual in Nature? Does one think of it as a source of camp or pure fear? It consumes us, literally. As a bioweapon that shoots and eats and destroys. It has and always will be the feared, spectated, and degraded... the dis/abled queer. I investigate 'queer monstrosity' as a schizophrenic, trans feminine academic who survives multiple lives. There are three parts to my inquiry that is focused on this creation of lived experience: gender, sexuality, and dis/ability. How does including dis/ability in conversations regarding BDSM alter the meaning and contextualization? Queer Monstrosity is a term that brings Feminist, Queer Studies, and Dis/abled scholars together with intention. The queer monster is something that hasn't been considered enough in the contexts of gender, sexuality, and dis/ability theory.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

I am writing this piece as a schizophrenic, mentally ill person who is on the spectrum. My language is long and intentional and spiraling just as my experience in the world feels. It is skewed, bent, queered, as is the way I write. I see, stimulate, smell and hear things in ways that my readers may never experience; therefore, creating an intimate writing piece for you would feel falsified or performative unless it includes these parts of me. As a pro-Mad, professional dominatrix who has felt isolated from academia for all my time here, I think of this thesis as a small piece of resistance. Thesis as a tool that I can use to choose a language that feels like it belongs to me and the people that may never read it, but whose lives it explains.

My experience as a dis/abled, femme, trans, dominatrix is one that speaks to me as queer monster, a freak, a body that experiences cycles of violence. Some of these cycles are chosen by me, as I use them as a tool to educate people and my own psyche. There's a difference between autonomous 'good' pain and uncongenial 'bad' pain. I ask you to re-imagine some worlds with me that are very intimate for all of us. After all, isn't a thesis simply you watching me talk to my academic hallucinations?

Queer Monstrosity is a collaborative term I will be using to queer the freak. The term 'queer' does not necessarily mean queer as a sexuality, but as a means of bending modern

ideologies of what a 'sexed body' should do, feel, look, move, bend like. Monstrosity will be used as a means of the aesthetic. What does an unsightly feeling of seeing a person that is seen as a monstrosity mean? These politics of disgust that come into play are because of not only the image, but the sexuality of the image. The sexed body that has a sexuality and participates in monstrous acts, in this case, BDSM. Feminism needs further research and advancement in feminist use of dis/ability and queer theories. The breadth of my sources within the term queer monstrosity included many collaborators within the field of disability: Rosemarie Garland Thomson, Nancy Eiesland, Kim Hall, Shanna Kattari, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, etc. These writers, along with many others, are why I could research this topic.

My ways of seeing the world changed when I first started writing this thesis and came to the verge of blindness because of an illness that I did not have insurance to cover or the bodily ability to heal without antibiotics, steroids, and professional care. In the summer, when I was originally supposed to finish my degree, I got the worst case of conjunctivitis that every doctor I went to said it was the worse that they had ever seen. After three hospital visits in one week, nine different nurses, five different doctors, six different medications, and scarred tissue being scraped out of my eye sockets by professionals that didn't deem it necessary to tell me about what was happening to my sight and my body, I felt that this thesis was a space to show my gratitude for my sight. I believe that this thesis may never have been written without the pure luck of a grant covering my ability to see a specialist in order to not go blind. My vision is much worse now, but I am incredibly thankful to have the ability to read, write, and see. Especially so

at an academic space such as Loyola and having access to journal articles, books, and my professors whom appreciate their work and their students fiercely.

My interests in this topic are from my lens in this world of academic jargon I've somehow survived in for almost a decade versus what my eyes sees outside of academia, but not without noticing gaps in my research pertaining to this thesis. I know that seeing through my own eyes versus another is political and self-serving and I want to start this off with a disclaimer of topics that I did not cover in this research.

I am writing this thesis as a white person and for my own research purposes, I know that I am not speaking on the intersections of dis/ability, Blackness, and queerness that is deeply deserving of explanation. Monstrosity theorists all around know that race plays a large factor in anti-Black culture and therefore, the dehumanization of persons further with dis/abilities is doubled in intersectional analysis. Black people were put on display and stolen from their homeland in order to entertain and perform erotic acts for almost all white viewers in many side/ 'Freak' shows. Often, this was after slavery was abolished, although society was and is far from seeing Black people as valued, whole persons. The case of Sarah Baartman comes to mind, whose 'stage' name was the 'Hottentot Venus'. I want to acknowledge that my education is lacking in personal experience and knowledge on the topic and taking accountability of how my lived experience is full of privilege in this sphere. *Black Venus 2010* by Deborah Willis an incredible collection of works by Black femme scholars that focuses on the implications of race, sexuality, and Enfreakment that Sara Baartman experienced, as well as how writers relate to the

‘Hottentot Venus’ in their research and lives. Although I come from a mixed-race family, I cannot speak for my sister who is half-Black and growing into her identity, as she is only a child and deserves to live as a child as long as this society will let her. Additionally, her experience with colorism will differ from those who are not mixed race or are lighter in skin tone. I want to include those who are in the forefront of *Blackness and Disability* edited by Christopher M. Bell. In this text, Stella Bokali’s *Challenging Invisibility, Making Connections: Illness, Survival, and Black Struggles in Audre Lorde’s Work* the author speaks on how Lorde’s *Cancer Journals* and *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* should be read as dis/ability theory and taken into consideration by critical race theorists, feminists, and dis/abled scholars alike. As Lorde spoke not only on her dis/ability through cancer but living as a legally blind Black woman. Her name is known to many white feminists, but is her dis/ability considered in those conversations? From the ones I have heard in my 5 years in academia, hardly ever.

Additionally, my perspective is from a U.S. context. Unfortunately, this is assumed in many U.S. journal articles and shouldn’t be. From the perspective of globalization, there is 2/3 (I argue that it is more considering Indigenous people within the U.S. who are treated as second class citizens) of the world that is not being written about or considered any further than a heightened theoretical basis. These are the vast amount of people who are being debilitated in their homeland through climate change, global policy, and immigration laws. Many people are fleeing their land because of the climate change that WE created.

Queer monstrosity hasn't, as far as I have reached and found, had a place to talking about climate and environmental ethics, although dis/ability, gender, and sexuality alike are all effected deeply by the changes in and on our planet. Similar to the story of Sara Baartman, it is obvious that when an Indigenous person(s) being taken on a European tour because of their 'tribal' and 'savage' ways that this is affecting their community. Additionally, those who had no choice but to leave their family behind, often times against their will, unsure if they will return. Many of these individuals are promised prosperity and a safe return, but do not get either. We must practice humanity in our work as well as our lives and know that we are not the center of the world and are far from it.

Using existing brilliant works, I want to co-create this atlas with many others that see spectacles of suffering and traumatizing of disabled bodies as speciation as an important issue, specifically considering eroticism. As this is something that is taken from the dis/ability community from their presumed 'asexual' nature (Baxter, 2008; Mall and Swartz, 2012; Wenger, Downes, Blum, and Augustyn, 2017) by those who are able-bodied, this becomes a place where we fight and back and say, "Yes, we do have sexuality and we do have a place here." In the theoretical concepts of what makes a body I will identify below, specifically the body politic, I want to create a map of gender, dis/ability, and sexuality scholarship to speak on how queer monstrosity is a tool for empowerment for all bodies 'othered' through their labor/ consumption/ sexuality. BDSM, I argue, is a way to take the erotic into their own hands.

The trajectory of my research will start as follows: I want to define the different theoretical concepts that coincide and collaborate with queer monstrosity. In Chapter 1, I will explain my placement in what this terminology means to me and why queer monstrosity is different in the context of gender, dis/ability, and sexuality versus its uses in different fields and concepts. Furthermore, I will define Feminist Disability Studies, Monster Theory, Queer Theory, and The Body Politic in this context. These theories will be related to some additional definitions with their own frameworks I'm interacting with including Enfreakment, Freakery, chimera, nondescript, etc. Chapter 2 is titled 'Taking Back Control' meaning that those who are queer monsters, as specified through the theories in Chapter 1, how do we take back the terminology and history? Can we make space for ourselves when others do not consider our existence in space, time, history, and sex? I argue that Enfreakment can be used as a source of power because dis/abled queer bodies are no longer considered 'fractured' or 'incomplete,' but instead we are extraordinary bodies that deserve space, love, and care. This love is a part of the good and bad pain dilemma that BDSM interacts with. There is a reason that people with dis/abilities go to this community for creative ways of seeing their sexuality and chronic pain as sexually erotic and interconnected. This idea of pleasurable pain, I argue, is the source of taking control of one's own exploitation, therefore, turning into the queer monstrosity. One does not get rid of the queer monster through this work, instead they utilize it as a positive tool for their own sexual wellness and autonomy. In short, the queer monstrosity is coming out of the closet as the monster and staying out and not putting on our 'normal' masks. Insight that fear in others

and explore with that fear in yourself within boundaries that you have control of (BDSM). In my final thoughts, Chapter 3 “Consuming My Matter of What Matters” will reiterate my point on the extraordinary body versus the ‘incomplete’ body. This is where I urge you to re-imagine with me what may linger as an unanswered question with you, the reader, and your own walks of life and this discussion. This collaborative term has many spaces, definitions, and feelings surrounding it for a reason.

Talking about a body in pain is uncomfortable based on our own visceral response systems. Seeing a body that is unlike ours can be shocking and insight an initial response of disgust. Reading from a mind that is unlike ours can also create a source of discrediting and therefore, can make one re-consider if this knowledge is valuable or relevant to the reader. Let me preface, queer monstrosity is in all of us. It is not something that only pertains to my dis/abled, queer, trans- feminine body. If you are a reader that will never hear things that are not there, what does it mean for you to be experiencing my writing as a schizophrenic, dis/abled trans person? In ‘consuming my matter of what matters’ are you using a piece of yourself to analyze if I am a valuable source of knowledge? Again, I want to ask you to re-imagine these worlds with me as a passenger.

### **Theoretical Concepts of Feminist Disability Studies, Monster Theory, and The Body Politic**

One of the spaces where those with dis/abilities are presented as sexual beings are in ‘Freak’ or Side shows. These began in the Mid-16th century and continue today (Thomson, 1996). Everything from a dis/abled person’s genitals, skin color, tattoos, limbs (or lack thereof), and attachments would be on display. If they were hermaphrodite or intersex there would be

a further erotic connection to them from the audience. These shows were not only ableist and transphobic, but they also had a heightened racism that came from the assumption that Black people were not human. The account of Sara Baartman (otherwise known as her 'stage name' the Hottentot Venus) is an important examination of this (Thomson, 1996; Black Venus 2010, Willis). I use the term stage name because this correlates with safety practices within sex work, but in this context it was a pure racial and sexual fantasy that had nothing to do with the security of her own identity. This oversexualized, eroticized nature of freak shows is where I believe the queer monster was born.

These queer monstrosities were never given an agency over their sexuality. Instead it was put onto display for those who still assumed that they had no option but to be asexual unless they were a part of performance for a heightened spectator. In other words, there was never pleasure for themselves but only pleasure of others. This falsified asexuality that is pushed onto dis/abled people is present and exhibited (Baxter, 2008; Mall and Swartz, 2012; Wenger, Downes, Blum, and Augustyn, 2017). This freakery was never a form of seeing representation but being put on display to animalize, dehumanize, and objectify another person.

These white men who ran freak shows worked within this context only if freakery was successfully achieved. Freakery is "to make the physical particularity of the seemingly neutral, tractable, and invulnerable instrument of the autonomous will" (Thomson, 1996 11). In other words, it needs to be a perfect balance between animalized, dehumanized, and human. This is when freakery is achieved. The people on stage would have this falsified concept of

empowerment, as they are on a stage, but all the while being spectated, mocked, and negatively sexualized as they are not usually making a consensual decision in this sexualization. These contexts of monstrosity, Enfreakment, and dis/ability give an opposing context of hope that I see in BDSM and sexual wellness. I hope that BDSM and sexual wellness has a place for queer monstrosity, as BDSM is a community that many dis/abled researchers and people find solace in regards to their chronic pain, othered experiences within sexuality, and safety and consent in the performance; which has been researched on both personal and empirical accounts by a sex educator that focuses on BDSM for chronically painned bodies and empirically validating their experiences (Kattari, 2015).

### **The Body Politic**

“Monstrous bodies function as magnets of which culture secrets it’s anxieties,  
 questions, and needs at any given moment”  
 -Garland Thomson in Freakery

Body studies focus on eroticism as well as sexual normalcy and beauty standards. Conformed bodies are, by the definition of Richardson and Locks in *Body Studies*, the opposite of the monstrous body. The monstrous body has a reposition of anxieties in which they have no place of their own. “In order to deal with their fear and anxieties cultural phobias can be contained within the body of the monster” (Richardson & Locks, 2014, 52). The first monsters created were from religious scenarios of sin and disgust. Therefore, cultural religions will dictate who is a monster in one space-time and who is not in another. Once science caught hold of these ideologies and bodies, they became displayed for what was called ‘scientific exhibits,’ although

most would argue this is the definition of voyeurism. For all intents and purposes, I use the term medical studies as something that is framed as affects the body's ability/ mobility, but really, is more in the realm of creating distance between those who need mobility aids and those who do not. More often than not, these folks are healthy people put on display not for research, but exploitation. I do believe mentally dis/abled people are also displayed in enfreakment, but the spectacle piece is something inherent to the creation of 'freakshows.'

Enfreakment appeared after monster was considered outdated, right around the time that Freak or Side shows became popularized in Europe and the U.S. which was the late 1940's (Richardson & Locks, 2014). Enfreakment is different from monster because it was publicized and commercialized and had these two characteristics: one, 'an exoticized mode' (56); and to appeal to the curiosity and exotic delight that spectators experienced of 'peering at the savage sexuality' (56). Two, an emphasized freakery through a talent such as singing, dancing, or even simply being made to elaborate a quite normal (sized, aged, gendered) person through props and materials.

"Freakery emerges from cultural rituals that stylize, silence, differentiate, and distance the persons whose bodies the freak-hunters or showmen colonize and commercialize. All the differences between them into a freakery, a single amorphous category of corporeal otherness. The freak is an icon of generalized embodied deviance, the exhibitions also simultaneously reinscribed gender, race, sexual aberrance, ethnicity, and disability as inextricable yet particularly exclusionary systems legitimated by bodily variation—all represented by the single multivalent figure of the freak. This what we assume to be a freak of nature was instead a freak of culture"

- Thomson in *Freakery* (1996, 92)

This all got queered when dis/ability study theorists took these terms and considered what it meant when a monster or enfreaked body had a dis/ability. Within healthcare settings, dis/ability and biomedicine found that a body was differently abled. Science had an academic crush on ‘classifying and regimenting different types of bodies’ (Richardson & Locks, 2014, 63). ‘Biomedicine wanted to diagnose, aka “improve” and exclude, the flawed body, as they could not contribute to the economic workforce’ (63). In conclusion, the body in this context was deemed unusable via capitalist labor and saw as a nuisance, “a pitiful object, and useless” (Richardson & Locks, 2014).

Freak shows, in this context, can be made into many spaces of cultural gazing upon another’s body shown as elaborated and extraordinary. For example, weightlifting championships, wrestling, weight loss commercials, or talent shows to achieve peak freakery. In response to people’s bodies that fit within this categorization are mixed with disgust, horror, and an unconventional attraction that is sexually driven. For example: The Lobster Boy, The Conjoined Twins Daisy and Violet Hilton, hermaphrodites, bearded ladies, Hottentot Venus, etc. played as pawns of the extraordinary mobility, sexuality, and speculation. My use of body studies is making it/them the center of analysis when it comes to BDSM and dis/ability. Therefore, body studies is a space where the body is spoken of as the ‘very stuff of subjectivity’. These people are a containment of disgust and orifices to be spectated. But in this context, aren’t all bodies sectional freakeries when focused on through an erotic portion? What is the difference between a defective versus an extraordinary body? By these standards, it is simply the attention and attraction of the ‘normal’ and therefore, the powerful.

## Monster Theory

“The monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us. In its function as dialectical Other or third-term supplement, the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond—of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within. Any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual.”

-Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *Monster Theory* (1996, 7)

‘Firstly, the monster’s body is a cultural body. And yet, it is still a metaphor. A monster is that which warns, that which reveals. One literally must rise it from a dissection table in to reveal the secrets of such a cultural enigma’ (Cohen, 1996, p 4). In *Fear of the Monster is Really a Kind of Desire*, Cohen connects an ulterior means of sexuality (BDSM) and monstrosity. “Through the body the monster fantasizes of aggression, domination, and inversion are allowed safe expression in a clearly delimited and permanently liminal space. Escapist delights give way to horror only when the monster threatens to overstep these boundaries, to destroy or deconstruct the thin walls of category and culture” (17). In the context of freak shows those who were in it did it for the pleasure of an outside viewer, not their own pleasure. BDSM in this context is only relevant to those who cross the boundaries of what the queer monster subjects itself to. The sadist viewer must, then, look at themselves as rapist of the cultural monster; the containment of the monster’s fantasies, for if the monster enjoys it it is not monstrosity. The only enjoyment is that of the audience, which could also be a metaphor for the phallus.

Cohen makes the connections that director Francis Ford Coppola was working on a documentary on AIDS; simultaneously while he was working on *Dracula* (1996)

Homosexuality and vampires have always had a connection within history; Coppola takes this further by “taking the disease of vampirism into a sadistic form of redemption through the torments of the body in pain” (Cohen, 1996, 5). With monster theory, one sees how sexuality, dis/ability, and gender turn to BDSM in cultural readings simply because one doesn’t know what to do otherwise. Why is it that BDSM must be in the forefront of the vampirical AIDS crisis? It is because, ultimately, the viewers are sadists and want all queer monsters to die before every being accepted in their society. Homoerotic fantasy, BDSM, dis/abled body studies, and transidentities are all interactions through Monstrosity in Cohen’s *Monster Theory*.

### **Feminist Disability Studies**

“The body becomes disabled when it is incongruent both in space and in the milieu of expectations. Furthermore, a feminist disability theory presses us to ask what kinds of knowledge might be produced through having a body radically marked by its own particularity, a body that materialized at the ends of the curve of human variation.”

-Kim Hall’s *Feminist Disability Studies* (2011, 30)

Feminist Disability Studies is all about connecting Monster Theory with feminist-queer-disabled theoretical concepts of the body politic. This knowledge production that Hall mentions above is where I want to seek my own answers. Having a differential, feminist-disabled body will further examine the means of dis/ability in the world of feminist theory. We need more disabled feminist scholars to feel that dis/ability is just as important as their identity as a woman or femme person. Furthermore, this call for research and action will, hopefully, investigate the connections with gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and class using the context that dis/ability is inherently feminist. In these different ways of seeing within *Feminist Disability Studies*, one re-imagines with the writer the contexts of sight with Kleege in this recount of a legally blind

feminist dis/abled theorist looking at a Matisse painting (Hall, 2011). Additionally, reading the interviews with Ellen Stohl, the first disabled Playboy bunny and how she sees her sexualization as a source of power where she has not always felt sexy as a paraplegic woman. Ellen states, 'Look at me! I am more a woman than I am a wheelchair' (Hall, 2011). Sexual equal opportunity is what she was advocating for and this is what I am advocating for in the taking back of language within queer monstrosity. In short, this theoretical concept building off of the body politic and monster theory will be a backbone to the reanimation of the queer monster.

CHAPTER TWO  
TAKING BACK CONTROL



Figure 1. Photograph from performance artist collective Sins Invalid (2011)

In this chapter I argue that Enfreakment can be used as a source of power because dis/abled queer bodies are no longer considered ‘fractured’ or ‘incomplete,’ but instead we are extraordinary bodies that deserve space, love, and care. Below, I will analyze case studies by researcher Shanna Katz Kattari and discuss the implications of taking control in sexual wellness of the queer monster. One does not get rid of the queer monster through this work, instead they utilize it as a positive tool for their own sexual wellness and autonomy. The results of this qualitative research find that queer dis/abled people find solace in BDSM communities because rhetoric’s of pain are often times out of their control and bio medicalized. In short, medicalization, more specifically the lack of communicating healthy sexuality within biomedicine, makes their bodies seem

fractured and ‘too fragile’ for a healthy sexuality. Additionally, I dive into what this research means for BDSM and queer monstrosity as being interconnected. Furthermore, I speak on how feminist disability comes together literally in the case of the famous sisters Daisy and Violet Paris who are connected by their collective spine. Additionally, I state that the Cartesian split model for bodies do not include those who have bodies in trouble or in pain. Often times, when needing mobility aids our way of living is a cyborg- approach. As our minds may do what our bodies are supposed to with ghost limbs and other means of remembering that we have a body, but then re-remembering how we use it differently.



Figure 2. Photograph from performance artist collective Sins Invalid (2012).

## **BDSM and Pleasurable Pain Politics in Dis/ability Communities**

Kattari is a sex educator that focuses on BDSM for chronically painned bodies. She interviews non-monogamous disabled people and queer disabled people who are all in the BDSM community. Research suggests that positive/negative pain provides a rationale for why the dis/abled people in this study have to have a little bit of sadist or masochist in them to survive and to thrive. It allows them to take control over their bodily sensations and their autonomy.

“Another way that BDSM and kink practices were used by some of the participants and their partners was around managing or even getting around daily, disability related pain. Jane, a lesbian woman in an open relationship, whose current primary partner also had a disability, gave an example of how they could communicate on how they could reduce her partner’s daily pain by instead adding in positive pain or “good” pain in order to lower “bad” pain that *stemmed* from her partner’s disability. For Jane and her partner, being able to control the “good” pain, including deciding what Jane would do to her partner, and her partner having the ability to consent to this pain, and to ask for the “good” pain to stop when she wanted it to, gave them a new level in their sexual relationship that incorporated disability along with sexual desires and needs, all integrated together with disability awareness.”(Kattari, 2015 p. 892)

Despite all of this, the acceptability and scope of dis/abled people being sexual beings is small and only in bubbles within populations. Only a few dis/abled people do educational work within the BDSM community. It is known that many people with dis/abilities already participate in BDSM, but do not feel represented or safe to speak out on their experience with this for a variety of reasons. These vary from fear of harassment to feeling further exclusion, othering, and ‘Enfreakment.’ Barnes makes the interconnections between wellness and disability. This wellness is pivotal to emotional and physical wellbeing. It has been shown that a healthy sexuality can produce more serotonin and decrease stress on the body. This is even more important for dis/abled people as folks with symptoms such as chronic pain, severe mental illnesses, and/or other chimeras of illnesses, and therefore, chimeras of care. I advocate for sexual wellness to

include BDSM, as wellness is unique to each person, but most individual for those with disabilities (Barnes, 2016).

Falsified asexuality is also pushed onto dis/abled people (Baxter, 2008; Mall and Swartz, 2012; Wenger, Downes, Blum, and Augustyn, 2017) in publications. Health care practitioners have included topics on disability and sexuality, although there has not been an initiative to speak to disabled patients about their sex lives and if they are maintaining a healthy sexuality as a part of their wellness plan. Studies primarily focused on students have found that this topic is something many disabled people want to speak about, but do not feel they have enough time or attention from their practitioner to do so (Mall and Swartz, 2012; Tellier, 2017). So, yet again, sex of a disabled person gets put on the back burner.

### **Can Enfreakment and Freakery Be Used as a Source of Power?**

“I have no more evident monstrosity and the miracle in the world than myself. We become habituated to anything strange by use and time, but the more I frequent myself and know myself, the more my deformity astonishes me, and the less I understand myself”

-Freakery, Thomson (1996, 175)

I want to use the case of Daisy and Violet Hilton, the infamous Hollywood starlets that were conjoined twins to talk about gendered separatism and the way that my experience within BDSM brings together a case of power, autonomy and community under the lens of Enfreakment.

### **Gendered Separatism, Distinction, and Autonomy**

Queer monsters deny the modernist ideals of separatism, distinction, and autonomy (Shildrick, 2002). The Cartesian split of mind and body as a model element oppress bodies as seeing them unable, insufficient, and below the mind. Re-imagining the monstrous disrupts these

notions and instead sees a body as extraordinary. The idea of being united as whole is disturbing to the West, as a Cartesian split of these two sisters would mean death. Their individuality is missing, and therefore, distinction, individuality, and autonomy are something that is never in isolation to either Violet or Daisy. They, I argue, experience autonomy and individuality together, and therefore, horrified the ‘modern man.’ Instead of missing something, they instead add something unique, suspicious, homo-erotic, and sexy to the public gaze.

The example displayed by Daisy and Violet Hilton is a place where the fear of feminine queer monstrosity hit the public in a literal and interesting way. In *Freakery*, Thomson speaks to the interesting case where gender, sexuality, and dis/ability came together. The conjoined twins Daisy and Violet Hilton embodied an American fantasy and nightmare as their “merged selves corporealized in conjoined twins both reflects a democratic imperative—where all the selves are in a sense the same, interchangeable self—and imperils the stability of unique selfhood so stressed by American individualism” (Thomson, 1996, 67). As women’s liberation movements in the U.S. context were occurring, there was a freak show including the “highly controversial figure that was doubly female” (Thomson, 1996 174). Women’s suffrage was achieved in the 1920’s (or later for non-white women), and during this time the public was obsessed with the concept of women’s labor. Most of this labor being spectated was via the concepts of marriage, household roles, emotional labor, and private acts aka sex. As this concept of the New Woman arose during the post-suffrage era, women tended to spend far more time together than with men (Thomson, 1996). Some of these relationships turned erotic, where they felt deeply empowered and satisfied with woman love (Thomson, 1996). Others were purely platonic, but female bonding and women creating

revolutionary spaces for one another is seen just as dangerous to the white cis male, and to heteronormativity, perhaps even more so (Thomson, 1996). The 1920's is also when 'radical' concepts of women's reproductive health became accessible to more of the population, giving women further autonomy over their bodies (1996). With the concept of the New Woman, comes this idea of woman unity. This unity, Thomson argues, is quite literal for Violet and Daisy Hilton. As feminist sisters, they were happy without men, which made them threatening and erotic to the public male eye (1996). As autonomy was not without the other twin but was in resistance to men who threatened their collective lives from being sovereign.

This threat to the public male was really a threat to the institutions of marriage, family, and women's unrecognized labor. They were financially independent stage performers, talented women who were in the spotlight. The twins were represented in a variety of ways, mostly as domineering and emasculating (1996). This is the way that lesbians are viewed in public spaces today. Violet and Daisy's queer history is spectated by their appearance in the movie *Freaks*. In *Freakery*, Violet and Daisy Hilton are a "bond represented by the power of women united together, and of how, as a concrete commercial fact, the bond ensured stability"



Figure 3. Photograph of Daisy and Violet Hilton voting in 1940's (2002).

(Thomson, 1996, 178). The twins “physical conjunction collapse the border between public and private—between external, masculinized realms of politics, enterprise, and spectacle, and image, feminized realms of domesticity—upon which the ideology of traditional marriages depends” (1996, 181). I agree that there was a disordered conventional understanding of intimacy, creating confusion for the viewing public who speculated about how they had sex. Can both twins feel the effects of an orgasm? Is this unholy in nature? I do not believe that their lives were some sort of rebellious life story to be read on. Violet and Daisy Hilton were shown on multiple accounts to have experienced pain in their condition and experienced ableism in not being able to travel or even getting a formal education. Their exploitation for monetary value started as young as 3 years old. In their autobiography, *The Lives and Loves of the Hilton Sisters*, Daisy wrote “I am not a machine; I’m a woman” (Jensen, 2006, 45). I believe that her notary on theorists like Thomson and many others would be that there may not be a single act of resistance in their life, only survival of women who shared the same aching body.

Although Daisy and Violet Paris did not partake in BDSM, one can see that their collective sexuality was inherently queer in nature and their sexual thriving within their collective relationships. It is all about the conformity of societal expectations of who is in a dominant and submissive role. In *Freaks*, the appearance of the sisters Daisy emasculates Violet’s fiancé by questioning his role of head of household. Shortly after, you see their erotic pleasure is felt together. “Daisy. . . relishes the erotic pleasure of their night right along with her sister. Such a sequence serves, once again, to reveal the frightening prospects that the twins

pose—prospects such as women sharing simultaneous sensual enjoyment, or husbands unable to control altogether when where, and how their wives experience sexuality” (1996, 182).

Watching such a fear play out on the big screen shows that they served as signifiers of some cultural phenomenon that the public could not get enough of. Where, Daisy and Violet were considered a threat to men because of their success and financial dominance over their husbands. If this sense of self that the sisters had collectively existed, then isn't the self therefore queered and bent into more than a dualism with another? Isn't the self—double? Here one sees narrations of the freak: like us, but not like us in this way. How does one take back their bodies from the spotlight when their private life is in the center of it? Could a two-headed dominatrix make a man submit twice as fast? Their exclusion in 'vanilla love' leads some with differently abled bodies to turn to BDSM for erotic and anatomical fulfillment. The subset of fetish that the Hilton sisters performed on screen was emasculation and a female superiority subset that exists today within the BDSM community and is a tool I believe they could use if in another space-time.

In *Freaks* the sisters emphasizes the impact of female sexuality over the man, as the ratio is literally 2:1. The many times that one sees feminine erotic pleasure at the forefront are those who believe that women are elite and to be worshipped as they exist. This, even in the 20's, was considered an erotic fetish. Often times with fore fronting female sexuality there were aspects of BDSM at play, although the term did not exist at the time (McClintock, 1996). These cultural signifiers of women's liberation and men lacking control over a woman's sexuality is exactly what a gendered, sexual monster looks like. One cannot imagine a monster without the eyes that

we have, maybe in a different place, or the idea of genitalia. What about a monster's genitals?

What does monstrous pleasure have to do with BDSM?

### **BDSM and Abnormality of the Post-Modern Whore**

“Men come to us to teach them how to treat the women in their lives every day.”

-A Fellow Dominatrix

Although much has changed for women since the Hilton sisters were alive, I find their case important in talking about emasculation, BDSM, and current whore politics. Emasculation and sissy play are something I do frequently in my work. I have done this with cis males, genderqueer people and trans women. The existence of a doubly female ‘freak’ is emasculating, but so is a woman who assumes power (masculinity), and sometimes phallocentrism over another man. Here we see masculinity and power being constructed together, as I believe any femme person does when asserting themselves and claiming space and ownership over their work, performance, and body, or bodies in relation to the Hilton sisters. More often than not, men want to be reminded of their power by losing it in a safe space with a woman who treats them with the same assumed, inherently masculine abuse and violence patriarchy attributes to men every day. I argue that BDSM is care work because it is a way for someone to feel pain of the feminine in a session. The session being I am doing post-consent with my client, and the care

work being how I aim to make this a positive experience that is affirming to their identities and their needs and desires.

I see BDSM as essential in my care work coming from my social work background. When I am with a client, I assess why they are looking for a particular service and very much think of our work together as a therapeutic session. Communication, boundaries, rapport, and trust are all a part of this work. I do not do sessions with people who are looking for services as a form of self-harm. I find that people's assumption of my work as a dominatrix and sex worker is an exploitation of myself. However, I remind you that many rural queer kids, including myself, have used this as an expression of their sexuality and a way to 'get out' of class boundaries. Additionally, not all people with dis/abilities can work a conventional 9-5 job. Applying for dis/ability, or any social service for that matter, has boundaries that we are all aware of. These boundaries include: immigration status, access, an understanding of documentation and social work jargon, transportation, time, and more. As a sex worker, many new online communities allow you to work from home and a computer for all of your work. I work from home and make enough money to support myself in the city. Having an online persona that doesn't center around your physical body can be a release for some people whose dis/ability is visible. You are allowed to share as much or as little with your clients and a submissives as you like. Many assume that BDSM is all about the in-session/in-person play. This is true for some, but not all. Many partake in domination of a person by simply text, voice call, and video chats. This includes lifestyle domination, chastity, and many more. Additionally, BDSM is a community. It is about finding friends and play partners and lovers who have the same niches you do. More times than not,

BDSM is a place that I have found lifelong friends who have transcended into relating to my life and my own dis/abilities more than anyone I have direct contact with on a daily basis. It is a place to find people who love and care and feel as you do. Again, there is a reason people with dis/abilities tend to find solace and acceptance in BDSM communities.

### **The Extraordinary Body Versus the ‘Incomplete’ Body**



Figure 4. Photograph 1 from Momenta Counterbalance performance (2019)

“Now I am who I will be. A body in trouble. I’ve spent all these years trying alternatively to repudiate and to control my wayward body, to transcend it one way or another. But MS rams me right back down into it. “The body,” I’ve gotten into the habit of calling it. “The left leg is weak,” I say. “There’s a blurred spot in the right eye.” As though it were some other entity, remote and traitorous. Or worse, as though it were inanimate, a prison of bone, the dark tower around which Childe Roland rode, wither-shins left, winder shins right, seeking to free the fair kidnapped princess: me. My favorite fairy tale as a child turns out to have nothing to offer my adulthood. Rescue from the body is merely another word for death.”

Diane Devries account on her MS prior to access to canes, and other mobility instruments.

*-The Disabled God*

One cannot talk about an ‘extraordinary body’ without considering spirituality and the dualism that this language has. I made the decision to focus within the context of religions that center Jesus Christ because I see the queer monster as a holy symbol. In a life altering text that I learned about through a self-proclaimed dis/abled feminist theologian, I found Nancy Eiesland’s *The Disabled God*. This text made me consider the godliness of a trans feminine, dis/abled body. A body that is allowed to be in the context of holiness, obscurity, and sexuality all at the same time. This, I argue, is the only conclusion to my knowing of queer monstrosity. Monstrosity is woman, queerness is obscurity, and holiness connects it to a loose divination of what it means to have a body and soul. It made me re-imagine worlds of spirituality, love, and forgiveness that never included considerations for my identity and my body prior to finding such a beautiful account of experience in text form. These personal accounts are different experiences that see a rare beauty and power within femme body holiness. A ‘rare beauty’ or a ‘complete body’ are two of the many terms used to explain this feeling.

Eiesland reminds her readers to not recontextualize our suffering for their own trauma porn. Instead, hear and listen. More times than not, our daily living of our disabilities is not seen as extraordinary enough for the able-bodied/minded reader. She makes the connection of disability and femininity being much like the statue of *Venus de Milo* (Eiesland, 39). This statue is seen as beautifully whole, integrated, and enough. Actually, she is more than enough, as she is the icon of feminine beauty and sexuality. Have you ever seen a dis/abled person dance? Swing along with them, knowing that all of their movement is a part of their body, and, therefore, a part of the performance. It is a beautiful experience to know that what we hold dear and/or necessary to us actually incorporates themselves into our movements. In 2019, I had the pleasure of seeing

Counterbalance live. Being able to feel the beauty, love, and safety within their body of work is truly holy.

A new frame of consciousness exists around the extraordinary body that society sees as more valuable than that of someone who has a dis/ability. This concept of the extraordinary body, the queer monstrosity, makes one re-image queer dis/abled people as the center of analysis instead of a far-fetched idea that takes one on a ‘tangent’ in a Gender Studies class. My existence is not a tangent, it never will be. How do we take this importance and translate it to activism instead of voyeurism? Is it possible to take this terminology and queer it into something dis/abled, pro-Mad scholars can use as an act of resistance?



Figure 5. Photograph 2 from Momenta Counterbalance performance (2019).

## CHAPTER THREE

### 'CONSUMING MY MATTER OF WHAT MATTERS'

I've "found" my voice, then, just where it ought to have been in the body-warmed breath escaping my lungs and throat. Forced by the exigencies of physical disease to embrace my self in the flesh, I couldn't write bodiless prose. ***The voice is the creature of the body that produces it.*** I speak as a crippled woman. At the same time, in the utterance I redeem both "cripple" and "woman" from the shameful silences by which I have often felt surrounded, contained, set apart; ***I give myself permission to live openly among others, to reach out for them, stroke them with fingers and sighs.*** No body, no voice; no voice, no body. That's what I know in my bones."

Diane Devries after her access to mobility instruments and seeing them as fundamental tools that are a part of her body.

*-The Disabled God*

In this conclusive chapter I will reiterate my point on the extraordinary body versus the 'incomplete' body. This is where I urge you to re-imagine with me what may linger as an unanswered question with you, the reader, and your own walks of life and this discussion. This collaborative term of queer monstrosity has many spaces, definitions, and feelings surrounding it for a reason. It is a complicated usage as it is about the idea of reclaiming language. Can you imagine reclaimed language in your own context and think of the conversations that surround the reclaimed word? It is often hurt, especially when it is within the context of intergenerational community members. I, for example, am not sure if I would appreciate someone calling me a queer monster passing by me on the street. It is still something that I feel should not be used by those who do not identify as queer as well as dis/abled when it comes to one labeling another. It

is the same conversation as asking people their identity instead of simply ‘calling them queer’ without asking. Because again, this term has some triggering memories for those who may have been called it in spaces of hurt and discrimination. Adding monstrosity to this term could feel even more painful. So how does one reclaim something that’s history was inherently hurtful for many? I argue that it is through conversation in our collective communities and through research work such as this thesis. What are the pros and cons of this work? Does it seem to far away to start calling ourselves queer monsters, as we are still considered so threatening to the general population? As Diane Devries mentions above, one could not write without the body that moves them. I hope that this thesis gives one a space to reflect on all aspects of how our identities escape to our writings. I do not write within a vacuum of academia. Instead, my writing comes from a place of re-learning my language as valuable and worthy of space, re-learning love within this volatile body.

There is power in exploring, loving, and being. BDSM is a place where I found comfort and safety within my dis/abled, femme sexuality. I have felt like an outsider in most spaces and feared ‘coming out’ fully. If I came out as trans and queer, I will not hold back my schizophrenia and autism experience. There isn’t a place that encompasses all of me. As a narrator of my own queer monstrosity, I know that your own may spark another interest for you instead of mine. I urge you to re-remember how I come to you.

The basis of advocacy is love. Love is wanting someone to love who they wish. Wanting others and ourselves to love who they wish involves needed tools in both psychically as well as

community based. The main point here is that dis/abled people deserve holistic wellness.

Accessibility is a primary piece of love and sexuality; therefore, justice is not only a disability issue, but a sexual issue as well. Sexuality and disability stems from one being able to get into a space to have intimacy. Queer disabled people can't fuck without being able to get into a sex shop in order to receive the tools that they need. Let's look at inaccessibility at Pride and fetish shops or other ableist representations of BDSM. Disabled people need education on what toys will do for them as they are not the audience intended for most sex toys and BDSM tools. We can't do any of this without the primary basis of love: wanting disabled people to get in and get it in.

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## VITA

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