

No Pity Fucks Please: A critique of *Scarlet Road*'s campaign to improve disabled people's access to paid sex services

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This article presents a critical commentary on the documentary *Scarlet Road* (2011). *Scarlet Road* promotes the value of sex work as a special service for disabled people (primarily men), and in the process addresses the stigma and marginalisation faced by both disabled people and sex workers. We argue that through its reiteration of discursive stereotypes of gender, sexuality, and disability, *Scarlet Road* unwittingly represents disabled people as undesirable and abject. While we oppose neither the legalisation of sex work nor the provision of access to sex services for disabled people, our position is that this does not provide an adequate solution to the exclusion of people with disabilities from sexual life. Thus, while campaigns to promote the value of sex work on the basis of its importance for the sexual rights of people with disabilities functions as a useful way to improve the image of sex workers, they simultaneously reflect and produce harmful stereotypes about disability.

In 1981, Evan Kemp, a vanguard for the nascent disability rights movement, published an article in the *New York Times* criticising charity telethons. Controversial then and perhaps even now, "Aiding the Disabled, No Pity Please" exposed the social fear of disability underlying the mobilisation of pity in televised charity drives. Discourses of disability and charity have long been grounded in the belief that disability is the exclusive domain of the medical sciences. Medicine, in turn, presents a disciplinary model in which funding produces the discovery of treatments and cures. This understanding of disability, known in disability studies as the medical model, fails to account for social/cultural systems of discrimination. In opposition to the medical model, the social model of disability emphasises how social systems produce disabling barriers (Oliver 1990). This model separates biological difference (impairment),

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from disabling social conditions (disablement)¹. Kemp's work exemplifies a social model approach to disability advocacy by revealing how discourses of pity produce disabling conditions.

The title of Kemp's piece inspired Joseph Shapiro's (1994) influential book *No Pity*, which in turn informs our title. We argue, here, that representations of disabled people² in an Australian documentary, *Scarlet Road* (2011), continue this trope of pity and unwittingly reinforce its ableist base. *Scarlet Road* follows the work of a New South Wales charitable organisation, Touching Base, whose mission is to legalise sex work and, in particular, to promote the right of disabled people to access commercial sex services. *Scarlet Road* features the co-founder of Touching Base, activist sex worker Rachel Wotton, as she shares the perspectives of disabled people who have accessed (or are trying to access) sex work. Wotton takes the audience on a journey to the United Kingdom, Denmark and Sweden, where she meets with other sex workers and speaks at the World Congress for Sexual Health. In addition to portraying Wotton's work as an activist, the film focuses on the stories of two disabled men: John, who has multiple sclerosis; and Mark, who has cerebral palsy. Both men describe their (positive) experiences as Wotton's clients. Touching Base's clientele is predominantly but not exclusively male: we also see a brief interview with Denise, who has cerebral palsy, and discusses her experience of commercial (hetero-)sex. Denise now works as a volunteer receptionist/administrator for Touching Base. Intellectual disabilities are not ignored. The film includes an interview with Otto Baxter, a young Englishman with Down syndrome, who is keen to lose his virginity via access to commercial sexual services. In telling these people's compelling and interesting stories, *Scarlet Road* attempts to subvert popular presumptions about sex and disability, while simultaneously challenging the stigma associated with sex work. *Scarlet Road* is, essentially, a political documentary that seeks to improve access to sex services for disabled people, emphasising how sex can be

¹ The social model has been criticised for failing to account for how the body and society interact (Snyder and Mitchell 2006; Wendell 1996). In our analysis of sex work, disability and charity discourse we acknowledge that biology/society cannot be easily separated into separate spheres because impairments may affect the sexual activities bodies can perform.

² In keeping with a social model of disability (which promotes a politics of disabled identity by emphasising socially constructed systems of oppression), we use the term 'disabled people' and not 'people with disabilities'. The 'person first' terminology, whilst encouraged in Australia, is consistent with the medical model of disability: the medical model locates disability as inhering in the (disabling) body (person-with-disability), rather than as an affect of (disabling) social-cultural norms (see Barnes 1997).

understood as a special service required for the freedom and wellbeing of disabled people. As such it enters an arena of longstanding, controversial, and productive feminist debate. It also comprises one element of a more recent campaign aiming to legalise and value sex work as a service for disabled people (Australian Sex Party 2010; Vincent 2012)—a struggle which gained popular traction with the release of critically acclaimed movie *The Sessions* (2012), starring Helen Hunt as a sex worker (or 'surrogate') for a disabled client.³ In short, in recent times the desirability of commercial sex services being offered to disabled people has emerged as a 'hot topic', albeit an under-researched one (Liddiard 2014, 837).

The thrust of this agenda—and indeed, sex work more generally—is “lamented by some feminists, lauded by others” (Holden 2011, 47). Those who believe that women are better served by the legalisation and destigmatisation of sex work (including, for example, E. Jeffreys 2005) may find an attractive and compelling rationale in arguments that link the revaluing of sex work with the rights of disabled people. However, those who understand commercial sex as infallible evidence of patriarchal domination see, in the efforts of Touching Base and similar organisations, the simple extension of male sex right. Sheila Jeffreys (2008) for example, condemns Touching Base as a dangerous enterprise serving only to further entrench women's sexual subordination. Her warning is that any alliance between sex workers and disabled people will inevitably be tainted by the patriarchal sexual order and is thus doomed to fail women in general, including, somewhat parenthetically, disabled women.⁴

It is not our intention, in this article, to enter into debate as to whether sex work offers *ipso facto* evidence of patriarchal domination. As Kate Holden observes, even “[t]o read up on feminist thinking about prostitution is a heroic project” (2011, 49). Our analysis draws on a different body of scholarship which investigates the intersections of disabilities, gender and sexuality (Garland-Thomson 2011; Shildrick 2009; Wilkerson 2011). Our focus is on *Scarlet Road's* representations of disabled people and, in particular, its representations of gender and sexuality. While we deplore the social deprecation and exploitation of sex workers, and agree that sex work should no more be a place for

³ The movie is based on the experience of writer/poet Mark O'Brien (1990).

⁴ In Sheila Jeffreys' (2008) account, disabled women appear to be subordinated women writ large: that is, they are just like able-bodied women, only more so. Thus Jeffreys refers to disabled women as “offer[ing] the double delights of gender inequality and disability as sources of sexual satisfaction to dominant male sexuality” (2008, 328) as if femininity and disability are identically or equivalently sexualised.

discrimination in the provision of goods and services as any other arena, we worry that the current impetus for reforming sex work does not serve disabled people well. Against Jeffreys (2008 *inter alia*), we argue that it is not women-as-a-group who are poorly served by the potential alliance of sex workers and disabled people advocated by Touching Base, but disabled people—and disabled women in particular. In our view, *Scarlet Road* inadvertently represents disabled people in problematically gendered, homophobic, and ableist ways. Our work here is a different warning: feminists should avoid imagining that in the kinds of advocacy for sex work/ers presented in *Scarlet Road* and other, similar, campaigns, there is an easy alliance to be identified in the victimising operations of sexism and ableism. This is not to deny that opportunities for solidarity may exist, but rather to suggest that any such alliances must be forged carefully.

To this end, we take *Scarlet Road* as the object of our analysis, using discursive methods to explore and criticise its representations of disabled people in general, and disabled women in particular. Like most documentaries, *Scarlet Road* offers audiences a snapshot of mediated but ostensibly real social actors, engaged in real life circumstances/events. The mediated nature of documentary film means that although social actors do not pretend to be fictional characters on screen, they do 'play' themselves and adapt their presentations in response to others (Nichols 2010, 9). The authenticity of the actor's appearance must be read with an awareness that the filmmaker, to some degree, influences what we see.⁵ For example, documentaries often employ the structural convention of a story organised around a particular, singular problem to be solved. The film introduces that problem, presents some contextual information, examines the contours or effects of the problem, and offers a solution (Nichols 2010, 21). Like any other media product, documentaries are neither naïve nor necessarily objective, despite often presenting themselves as such. The financial sponsors of documentary films are stakeholders who may direct filmmakers to gloss over complexities and promote their preferred solution (Nichols 2010, 22). Touching Base, as both a significant stakeholder *and* the chief corporate 'character' featured

⁵ For example, *Scarlet Road* presents what Nichols (2010, 34) describes as the *participatory mode* of documentary—a production technique emphasising interactions between the filmmaker and subject/s through an interview driven style. This mode often includes what he calls the 'masked interview', in which the filmmaker interviews subjects, but the filmmaker's questions are asked off-screen. The interview is 'masked' because we do not hear the questions or promptings that produce the subjects' responses, and hear them, instead, as unframed statements.

in the film, cannot really be separated from the story *Scarlet Road* tells: like a corporate actor-director, it is simultaneously part of the on-screen cast and the production process. Setting aside debate about the worthiness of its cause, Touching Base has an agenda to promote sex-work as a primary solution to the unmet sexual desires of disabled people. This, however, does not tell the whole story—and it is those other, less apparent, aspects of the story that concern us here.

Media discourses both reflect and produce social/cultural perspectives of disability. Analysis of media texts enables us to consider if disabled people are represented in stigmatising or more enlightened ways—where the latter means engaging with disability rights activism (Clogston 1990; Haller 2010). On the surface *Scarlet Road* appears to present a progressive social model along with a rights-based approach to representing disabled people. We contend, however, that the film also presents traditional stigmatising discourses, and that these appear alongside its rights-based agenda. Whilst the stigmatising view that disabled people are asexual is challenged, the cultural belief that disability is always tragic, undesirable, and an occasion for pity is reinforced through the mobilisation of ableist tropes. Several such tropes are evident not just in *Scarlet Road* but also in the broader campaign of which it is a part. These include discourses of 'sex(ability)', a term used to describe representations that seek to educate able-bodied audiences about disabled people's sexual desires and capacities (Esmail et al. 2010, 1152); sex as a form of corporeal therapy; and sex as an expression of or opportunity for charity. *Scarlet Road* mobilises each of these tropes in different ways, and we address some of these in other work (Rozengarten 2014). Our focus in this article is *Scarlet Road's* deployment of discourses of charity, and the subject positions that deployment produces. First, we draw attention to the historical trajectory in which disability, charity and pity are tightly intertwined. With this context in place, we turn our attention to *Scarlet Road* itself, identifying several discourses of pity and charity in the film which operate in various and often subtle ways to discipline, silence, and patronise.

Disability and charity: A trajectory

There are strong historical connections between discourses of charity and representations of disability. In the first place, the underfunding of disability services, disability research, and the wholesale exclusion of disabled people from lucrative or even typical employment has meant that

disabled people are often situated as the targets, 'faces' or beneficiaries of charity. The best known and earliest example of a media-based charitable campaign occurred in 1959, when a group of parents of children with muscular dystrophy started the first telethon on a television station in Cleveland (Shapiro 1994, 21). The now-familiar telethon format is a variety show in which entertainers and celebrities appeal to viewers to donate money for a particular cause (Shapiro 1994, 21). In 1966, an annual national Muscular Dystrophy Telethon began, hosted by comedian Jerry Lewis (Shapiro 1994, 21). Beth Haller (2010, 141) reports that Lewis described people with muscular dystrophy as 'only half people', claiming that 'with a cure, they can become whole' (Haller 2010, 141). As Haller observes, this rhetoric labels people with disabilities as 'not quite human', and suggests that they can only become complete humans if cured of their impairments. Not surprisingly, a number of disabled people have protested against this dehumanising discourse.

The first and best-known of these is Evan Kemp's article 'Aiding the Disabled: No Pity, Please' (Kemp 1981), to which we have already referred. Kemp, a disability activist and wheelchair user, argued that telethons foster prejudices about disabled people, and that their emphasis on children with disabilities discursively links disability with the innocence of children, presenting the perfect image for a 'pity appeal' (Kemp 1981). The telethon ignored adults with disabilities, and endorsed the stereotype that disabled people remain perpetually child-like (Shapiro 1994, 21). Indeed, this construction of disabled people as child-like has correlations with assumptions about asexuality and the sexual capacity of disabled people that continue today.

'Compassionate othering' and the pity fuck

There is nothing as offensive as Jerry Lewis's (1990, as cited in Shapiro 1994, 23) commentary in *Scarlet Road*, but echoes of disabled people as innocent and childlike remain. In London, Wotton visits Otto Baxter (who has Down syndrome) and his mother, Lucy. The Baxters featured in English media reports when Lucy aired her wish for her son to lose his virginity with a sex worker. During her visit, Wotton explains: 'We are not saying [commercial sex services are] ... the only option but they [disabled clients] do get a safer sex education, they get a warm environment' (*Scarlet Road* 2011). Here, sex work is discursively contrasted with other, 'riskier' options for learning about sex. The contrast may be germane, but it is just as important to consider risks of omission in this context.

Employing sex workers as sexual educators for men with intellectual disabilities poses a risk that knowledge acquired about sex work will be highlighted at the expense of developing knowledge and experience of non-commercial sexual relationships. In this sense, sex work may not be such a safe educational practice. In one scene, *Scarlet Road* demonstrates this problem. Wotton explains to Otto: 'It is legal for a sex worker to come here; you can order in like a pizza.' Otto responds: 'Like a shop.' Otto then explains that he likes 'big breasts, tattoos and a lot of hand-jobs'—a shopping list of preferences (*Scarlet Road* 2011). Comparing booking a sex worker to ordering a pizza—a metaphor reiterated in an earlier essay by Wotton and Isbister (2010, 173)—suggests that women are for consumption. It also objectifies sex workers as 'not human': sex workers become a product to be consumed. More mutually-oriented alternatives—or conceptualising a relationship in which Otto and potential sexual partners meet as equals—are not broached.⁶

Otto's mother Lucy explains her fears about Otto missing out on having a girlfriend. Lucy says: 'Otto really wants a girlfriend. He really wants the whole romantic passage.' She goes on to explain her concern with Otto's desire, identifying 'the anguish and damage that can be done to Otto, particularly if he sees everyone else having relationships, having sex, and he misses out' (*Scarlet Road* 2011). Understandably, Lucy wishes to protect her son from the pain of rejection associated with the risks of looking for a partner. However, this episode wrongly implies that people with intellectual disabilities are unable to cope with the pain associated with failed attempts to find love and sexual intimacy. As a person with an intellectual disability, Otto is constructed as being uniquely vulnerable to such pain and failure. This rather patronising representation dismisses the strength that people with intellectual disabilities demonstrate in negotiating their inclusion within the social realm. Otto does say that missing out on a girlfriend feels "quite bad, actually quite terrible"; however this feeling is a normal part of life and not unique to having an

⁶ Our point is at first glance sympathetic to Jeffreys (2008, 333) who, in arguing that the provision of sex education stressing mutuality should be preferred over the delivery of sex services to intellectually disabled men, presents similar ideas. The point of difference between us is that for Jeffreys, prostitution and men's sex rights are the problem (and women are its victims); for us, the social construction of disabled people as frightening, undesirable, and in need of charitable protection is the bigger concern. Indeed, Jeffreys' assumption that male clients are inevitably positioned as powerful relative to sex workers is thoroughly contradicted by Otto's story. Indeed, even as Wotton and Isbister (2010, 176) take pains to describe their dealings with disabled clients as steeped in mutual trust and respect, they acknowledge the potential for one-way abuses of trust in those dealings.

intellectual disability. The possibility that Otto might experience as much dissatisfaction with being the beneficiary of a kind of sex-as-charity as he does with his romantic frustration is not countenanced at all.

Otto expresses a desire to find a girlfriend. Our view is that he should be supported to learn about dating, to have access to spaces where dating occurs and to be provided with support to assist with coping with the highs and lows associated with looking for a partner. *Scarlet Road* implies that Otto's romantic desires can be placated by focusing attention exclusively on his sexual desires and the loss of his virginity: the information and opportunities necessary for pursuing his romantic aspirations are not addressed. Otto is a young man who seems sociable and personable, and it is troubling that he is represented as likely to miss out on success in love and/or obtaining sexual intimacy. Failing to guide him in developing the skills required for obtaining and maintaining mutual respectful relationships is likely to decrease rather than increase his chances of success. We readily concede that the job of offering such guidance is not Touching Base's responsibility; rather, in this respect *Scarlet Road* shows us one gap (disabled people's lack of access to sex workers) without acknowledging the much larger chasm beside it—namely, the social construction of disabled people as inherently sexually undesirable.

Otto is not the only client (or potential client) to be presented as patently unable to enter into a non-commercial sexual relationship. *Scarlet Road* discursively implies that a conventional intimate relationship is often—perhaps even normally—not attainable for the majority of disabled people. For example, in the companion study guide for *Scarlet Road*, the very first question students are invited to consider is: "What medical condition does John have that makes it difficult for him to have relationships that include being sexual and experiencing and exploring sexual intimacy?" (ATOM 2011). The question assumes that John's impairment, rather than the disabling effects of ableist culture, is the primary source of his loneliness.⁷ This is further evident when Mark, who has cerebral palsy, states: "It has been my lifelong dream to have a girlfriend," and "Rachel makes me feel like I have a girlfriend" (*Scarlet Road* 2011; see also Liddiard 2014). Importantly, a discursive silence follows; a silence that fails to explain why a girlfriend is not an option. This silence functions as a discursive trick (Rozengarten 2014; work-in-progress), whereby the audience should intuit that a relationship is not possible for Mark due to his disability.

⁷ This is not to deny that impairment complicates sexual activity.

There is no need for explanation because the idea that disabled people cannot be considered a viable relationship option is thoroughly naturalised (Alsop et al. 2002). In Evan Kemp's words, "The handicapped child is appealing and huggable—the adolescent or mature adult is a cripple to be avoided" (Kemp 1981). The marker of difference, it would seem, between the huggable and the repulsive disabled body is sexual maturity. Disabled adults are triggers of a thoroughly naturalised fear. *Scarlet Road* seeks to capitalise on this ableist assumption, and discursively promotes a form of compassionate othering towards disabled people. By 'compassionate othering' we mean a process in which the disabled body is marked as 'other' via discursive treatments that are intended to promote compassion. While 'pity' is an obvious target for disability rights activists, it is sometimes couched in ways that disguise its patronising ableism. To criticise charitable operations is sometimes interpreted as a demonstration of ungratefulness, and is taken as a kind of perverse evidence of the supposed beneficiary's decadence.⁸ The value of pity discourses lies in their expediency: as Shapiro (1994, 23) observes, "pity opens hearts" — and, we would add, wallets.

A portion of profits from the sale of this DVD will be donated to...

Discourses of charity persist both directly and indirectly in *Scarlet Road*. Unlike the Muscular Dystrophy Telethon, which openly requested donations for a cure, *Scarlet Road* issues a somewhat more covert invitation to donate. The organisation is "a benevolent charitable institution" whose aims include facilitating "links between people with a disability, their support organisations and the Sex Industry" (Wotton and Isbister 2010, 164). The organisation further describes its objectives as 'providing access to sex work, challenging issues of discrimination, promoting human rights, addressing legal issues and challenging attitudinal barriers that are relevant to the marginalisation of people with disabilities and sex workers' (Touching Base 2015). Its internet homepage includes a short clip from *Scarlet Road* and provides an opportunity to buy a DVD of the documentary, with a note that the producers (Paradigm Pictures) are 'generously donating twenty five percent of all DVD profits to Touching Base' (Touching Base 2015). Thus, even purchasing the documentary has a philanthropic overtone.

⁸ On the power relations inhering in benevolence, see Riggs (2004). Riggs explores the operations of benevolence in relation to racism and colonialism in Australia.

Discourses of philanthropy and charity do not end there. In one scene, Wotton declares that it is her dream to set up a not-for-profit brothel for people with disabilities. Her vision is that well-off people might donate to fund paid sex services for less affluent disabled people. Wotton and Isbister are shown drafting a letter to multi-millionaire Richard Branson,⁹ hoping that he will respond to their cause (*Scarlet Road* 2011). This scene attempts to draw on the compassion of an able-bodied audience. The existence of an organisation like Touching Base, and its mission to fund the training and community activities it does is by no means objectionable. The problem is that drawing on viewers' compassion in order to fundraise may also prime pity responses, given that audiences have been frequently and repeatedly exposed to similar rhetoric in representations of disability and charity. Compassionate othering becomes problematic because it may reinforce stereotypical beliefs that disabled people are patently, necessarily undesirable. Because they are positioned as inherently and obviously unable to participate in social-sexual life, disabled people require a special sexual service to meet their needs.

Gender/able trouble

Scarlet Road primarily focuses on the sexual desires of disabled men. While there is one brief scene in which a disabled woman, Denise, discusses having paid for sex, the dominant voices are those of male clients, reflecting the relative invisibility of disabled women in cultural texts about sexuality. Despite its marginalisation of women as clients, *Scarlet Road* repeatedly speaks in gender-neutral language, particularly in its iteration of the phrase 'people with disabilities.' This phrase disguises the dominance of the male voice on screen. Throughout, *Scarlet Road* largely fails to engage in any sustained way with the sexual and romantic interests of disabled women. Several effects relating to the exclusion or omission of disabled women's voices in *Scarlet Road* warrant discussion.

Because sex work is occupationally dominated by women, gendered stigmatisation in the industry is often experienced by sex workers, who are subject to a disproportionate share of sexual violence and exploitation (Holden 2011, 50). The able-bodied clients of sex workers are arguably also subject to stigma. According to sociologist Teela Sanders (2007, 446-447), men who engage in commercial sex are subject to negative stereotypes: they are, for example, often assumed to be incapable of

⁹ Branson heads the Virgin Group. The irony is no doubt intended.

developing or maintaining a conventional relationship due to some personal inadequacy. Sanders reports, however, that disabled men state that the shame, guilt or embarrassment of paying for sex is outweighed by improvements to their quality of life, self-esteem, and sexual confidence (Sanders 2007). This may be true for individual men, but it is also necessary to consider the potential consequences of representing commercial sex as a special need for disabled people as a group. Representation that promotes sex work as a form of charitable compassion for disabled people may have consequences for the self-esteem and well-being of the disabled population in general, and for disabled women in particular.

Disabled women may avoid ending abusive relationships if they believe that they are themselves part of a group usually understood to be an undesirable relationship choice. Disability theorist Lesley Chenoweth (1996, 405) explains that disabled women are often denied socially valued roles, prompting some to tolerate a violent partner rather than risk losing their relationship status. The threat of losing the valued role of partner is not the only reason some disabled women may experience difficulty leaving abusive relationships, but is rather one of many. The same rationale applies to able-bodied women, of course, especially those who are subjected to repeated messages from their abusive partner that no-one else could ever find them desirable or attractive. The complicating difference is that disabled women hear this message not just from violent or abusive partners, but from the world at large.

Confirming this, Douglas Brownridge suggests that disabled women are stereotypically conceptualised as passive and vulnerable, and may thus become easy targets for predatory men (Brownridge 2006, 808-809). Brownridge's research into violence against disabled women reveals that just as for able-bodied women, the most common perpetrators of violence against them are intimate partners (2006, 806). Again, mirroring the broader incidence of intimate violence, Women With Disabilities Australia (2014, 19) report that disabled women experience family/domestic violence more than disabled men. According to Chenoweth (1996, 392) social assumptions that disabled women are worthless, invisible and less than human increase their vulnerability to violence. In these ways, representing sex work as a special charitable case for disabled people may be beneficial to some individuals (primarily disabled men), but may simultaneously be damaging for disabled people (especially women) fighting for the kinds of social and representational change required for them to be recognised as 'relationship-worthy.' If paid sexual services

constitute an act of charity, it stands to reason that non-paid sexual partners may be conceptualised as having a charitable nature for providing sex without financial payment. This discourse may work to inform abusive men that disabled women do not deserve their respect.

So far, we have taken *Scarlet Road's* depiction of disabled people's (hetero)sexuality at face value. *Scarlet Road* represents disabled people as primarily if not exclusively heterosexual.¹⁰ Indeed, this heteronormative representation is reflected in the way that *Scarlet Road* has been presented in the media as conforming to desires 'everyone' shares and understands—'adding in' disabled people in much the same way that (limited) responses to sexism have 'added in' women (Gardner 1983; Rothschild 1988; Beasley 1999). This heteronormative shape is not acknowledged, nor is heterosexuality marked as anything other than 'natural'. For example, in the *Australian Women's Weekly*, sex therapist Bettina Arndt describes Rachel Wotton's work as necessary to 'help people feel comfortable with the opposite sex' (2013, 82), and does not consider the sexual circumstances of disabled queer-identified people. This is hardly surprising given that *Scarlet Road* contains only fleeting references to the sexuality of queer-identified people. One short scene shows Wotton and others marching in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, promoting Touching Base. Queer sexuality is briefly represented in another short scene in which Isbister explains that he and Wotton worked together on one occasion as a 'double-act' for Isbister's bisexual male client and his partner. It is not clear if this client is a disabled or able-bodied man. Apart from these fleeting instances, the sexuality of queer-identified disabled people is notably absent within *Scarlet Road*. Indeed disabled lesbians are entirely invisible. Such symbolic annihilation (Tuchman 1979) would not be surprising but that this is a documentary explicitly focusing on disabilities and sex. This erasure reflects the research findings of Corbett O'Toole (2000, 207-216) who notes that disabled lesbians are routinely ignored in publications and communities regardless of whether the focus of the group or publication is disability, lesbians or women. Consistent with a broader heteronormative agenda, then, *Scarlet Road* represents the sexuality of disabled people as routinely heterosexual.

¹⁰ In their earlier essay, Wotton and Isbister take pains to acknowledge that disabled people are neither uniformly asexual nor heterosexual, but their experience and analysis seems firmly centred on a client base that is apparently exclusively male (Wotton and Isbister, 2010, 158).

The Sex Worker with a Heart of Gold (and X-ray Vision)

On the front cover of the *Scarlet Road* DVD, the following statement appears: "The extraordinary work of Australian sex worker Rachel Wotton will open your mind to what goes on behind closed doors." Here and elsewhere, Rachel Wotton is constructed as fundamentally charitable—like Helen Hunt's character in *The Sessions*, she is a new incarnation of the prostitute with a 'heart of gold'. After all, what makes Wotton's work 'extraordinary' is not that she is a sex worker, but that she has sex with disabled men. Similarly, in an *Australian Women's Weekly* article entitled 'When Sex Is Your Day Job,' journalist Caroline Overington (2013) interviews sex workers, including Rachel Wotton. Overington adjudges Wotton to be the sex worker most 'likely to elicit the most sympathetic hearing', because she has clients with disabilities (Overington, 2013, 82). Characterising Wotton in this way in turn relies on the construction of disabled bodies as abject. Wotton's work is imagined to be extraordinary because it is culturally understood that disabled people are inherently undesirable. This undesirable imaginary is naturalised, as we have seen, through a number of discursive operations.

In their 2010 essay, Wotton and Isbister talk about the work of Touching Base in the context of the decriminalisation of sex work in New South Wales (Australia). They discuss what they perceive as the shared stigmatisation of sex workers and disabled people, but do not address or acknowledge their socially and structurally different positions. While Touching Base endorses mutuality and respect in sex work with disabled clients, it leaves ableist discursive assumptions unexamined. For example, throughout their essay, Wotton and Isbister refer to the establishment of a register of sex workers *willing* to undertake jobs with disabled clients (2010, 156, 161, 166, 172). The inference that many sex workers may be unwilling to work with disabled clients—and that this might constitute ableist discrimination on the part of sex workers—is not addressed. At one point 'willingness' to work with disabled clients is conflated with 'training' to undertake such work—a conflation quickly undone by the assertion that "many sex workers are quite able to adapt their services to the specific needs of a person with disability without "formal" training' (Wotton and Isbister 2010, 172).

If Wotton is imagined as extraordinary and charitable for providing paid sexual services to clients with disabilities, how are able-bodied people in non-commercial sexual relationships with disabled people culturally imagined? When scholars consider able-bodies who desire disabled bodies

it tends to be in relation to the fetishisation of disability (Ball 2002; Duncan and Goggin 2002; Fiduccia 1999; Solvang 2007). It is necessary to move beyond investigations into disability fetishism and consider how able-bodied sexual partners of disabled people are culturally imagined. Our contention is that when able-bodied people desire disabled bodies they are imagined to have a special, almost superhuman ability to gaze at the abject and to desire bodies which are labeled (in myriad culturally informed ways) as undesirable. Wotton is understood as extraordinary because she is imagined to have sufficient resilience to touch the untouchable and to gaze at the undesirable without revulsion; she is reified as having the strength to sexualise the abject.¹¹

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2009, 189) argues that the ability to see disabled bodies as figures of 'rare beauty' requires knowledge about how to look ethically at difference. For Garland-Thomson most people lack the skills to appreciate the beauty of the 'extraordinary body' and as such they require instruction on how to look ethically at difference. Disabled people, she argues, may provide such instruction through an intimate process of story-telling whereby they express a comfort with their unique bodies. It is possible to understand *Scarlet Road* as offering a forum for such story-telling, and to envision Rachel Wotton as someone who has learned to appreciate the rare beauty to which Garland-Thomson refers. We would suggest, however, that there is an additional step of separation involved in watching the documentary. Rather than simply sharing Wotton's (arguably) ethical view of disabled people in any immediate or unmediated way, the documentary's audience watches something else. Those unschooled in Garland-Thomson's practices of ethical viewing may imagine that the (paid or unpaid) able-bodied sexual partners of disabled people have a 'resilient gaze': that is, that they are specially equipped to either hide or avoid the 'normal' disgust usually attached to disabled people's sexualities—and are, perhaps, able to 'see through' (ostensibly ugly, unattractive) appearances. The viewer of the documentary can continue to stare without penalty, regardless of whether they recognise an instance of ethical viewing or identify a resilient gaze in the exchanges presented on-screen. The 'resilient gaze'—exercised by those who look without revulsion at disabled bodies—does not challenge the positioning

¹¹ The 'abject' domain relates to elements of social life that are deemed 'unliveable' and 'uninhabitable', but are nonetheless occupied by bodies that do not enjoy the privileged subject position (Butler 1993, xiii). In this context, Wotton is figured as a brave explorer at the edges of a zone of sexuality socially constituted as repulsive.

of disabled people as objects that are difficult to desire, but rather positions those exercising it as 'special' or 'extraordinary'.

The visual economy is complex. Adrienne Asch and Michelle Fine observe that disabled women who have able-bodied partners frequently find that their partners are exposed to curious inspection and misunderstandings. They demonstrate how cultural presumptions that disabled women are a burden and subjects of pity are projected onto their partners, who are often positioned as being somehow 'saintly' (Asch and Fine 1988, 18). Such constructions are intriguing, but research in this area is scarce and consequently there is not much opportunity to explore the idea of resilient desire. What is clear, however, is that while the feminist project has been concerned with the 'male-gaze', disabled women experience a different sort of gaze. Feminist disability scholars have termed this the 'male-stare,' and have contrasted the operations of the male gaze with both the stare *and* its corollary—an aversion to looking altogether (Ball 2002, 169; Garland-Thomson 2011, 34). Our hope is that feminist disability scholars will consider the positioning of non-disabled people in economies of desire that attend to contexts of ableism and sexism, and analyse what happens to 'the gaze' when it is directed towards bodies that fail to be 'properly' gendered because of impairment.

Sex trouble

In their 2010 essay, Wotton and Isbister respond to criticisms that *Touching Base* promotes access to sex workers as the sole option for disabled people to experience their sexuality. They counter that their intention was not to "limit the options" but "to ensure that people with disability can enjoy the same freedoms and choices" as their able-bodied counterparts (2010, 164-5). The justness of this kind of equality is incontrovertible. Goods, services, opportunities, rights and freedoms should never be withheld on the basis of disability. Indeed, there should be no need for a register of sex workers willing to take appointments with disabled clients, any more than there should be a need for a similar register of sex workers (or hairdressers, or any other personal-service provider) willing to take appointments with, say, Jewish or Irish clients. *Scarlet Road* may not intend to present sex work as "the only option" for disabled people (Wotton and Isbister 2010, 165), but nevertheless represents sex work as their primary sexual possibility. Despite Wotton and Isbister's protestations, *Scarlet Road* does in fact issue an appeal to discourses of (compassionate, benevolent) pity.

We have argued, here, that the undesirability of disabled bodies is culturally constructed—even in supposedly ‘progressive’ texts like *Scarlet Road*. The cultural construction of disabled people as fundamentally frightening is produced through discursive iterations that are performative—constructing undesirable disabled bodies in a way that appears as a natural inevitability of impairment. Butler understands gender as an illusion without substance (Butler 1990; Holmes 2007, 60). It is only through performative iterations that gender is made to appear natural and substantial. We suggest that just as stereotypes of femininity and masculinity are produced through performative iterations, so too are stereotypes of disability produced performatively. There is nothing inherently frightening, pitiable, or undesirable about disabled people. There is no substance to these stereotyped illusions, rather they are phantoms/illusions produced by discursive iterations.

Scarlet Road contributes to troublesome discourses about sex and disability. Intending well, it nevertheless offers stylised reiterations that produce disabled bodies as undesirable. As we saw in Otto’s story, a trope of protection can be deployed to argue that people with intellectual disabilities require paid sexual services because they cannot cope with the possibility of sexual rejection. Sex work functions here as a way to protect people with intellectual disabilities from emotional harm. This stylised reiteration, linking protection with the needs of people with intellectual disability, indirectly reflects and produces the stereotype that people with intellectual disabilities will normally be unable to find romantic relationships. Thus, disability is discursively produced as naturally undesirable. Because compulsory able-bodiedness (McRuer 2006; after Rich 1980) insists that certain capacities are normatively preferred, impairments are automatically understood within this framework as inherently undesirable. It is unnecessary to state overtly that disability is undesirable because its undesirability is taken for granted, and is embedded within discursive tropes of protection, pity, and charity. In this way, *Scarlet Road* (along with a range of other cultural products) brings the undesirability of disability into being. It produces, through reiterations of discourse, that which it names.

Scarlet Road is by no means the worst instance of such representation, nor are its portrayals relentlessly or entirely limiting. Alexa Schriempf (2001, 54) notes that one stereotyped view of disabled people is that they are imagined to be completely unable to have sex. *Scarlet Road* does, to some extent, challenge this view, and promotes the sex(ability) of disabled bodies. But it is a limited sex(ability). Our view is that

sex(ability) requires mutuality. *Scarlet Road* presents disabled people as 'sexual,' but their sexuality is limited to being recipients of (charitable) sexual services who do not (cannot) instigate or share pleasure. Thus, the Touching Base campaign does not merely fail to consider the broader ways that disabled people are excluded but also reproduces that exclusion.

We are not suggesting that the Touching Base documentary is not useful. Indeed, it is difficult to see how *Scarlet Road* could avoid the discursive trap we describe, given the problems associated with treating sex work as a solution to the exclusion of disabled people from sexual citizenship. Being imagined as an 'extraordinary' sex worker, with an attendant resilient gaze, may offer a kind of consolation for the routine stigmatisation of sex work, even if this imagining simultaneously positions disabled bodies as abject. Moreover, it may be true that disability sexual rights campaigns educate, to some extent, able-bodied audiences about the sex(ability) of people (primarily men) with disabilities, and we acknowledge the potential value in this. We argue, however, that *Scarlet Road* makes those educational forays only as it reflects and reproduces harmful stereotypes about gender and disability. Like Touching Base, we would welcome the destigmatisation of sex workers and disabled people, (and even disabled sex workers). Our argument, however, is that *Scarlet Road* begins to accomplish the former at the broader expense of the latter. To repeat our extension of Evan Kemp's apt formulation: aiding the disabled? No pity fucks, please.

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