

Disease & Desire: Sexuality, Disability, Screen-based media

by
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Abstract

Within the discourse about increased diversity in entertainment media, the need for more representation of diverse ability on screen is beginning to penetrate social awareness. Beyond quotas in relation to non-disabled characters, I am interested in the quality of characters with disabilities, particularly inclusion of their sexuality. The films and videos discussed in this thesis comprise examples of sexuality that appear progressive, but upon examination actually affirm heteronormative and ableist hegemony regarding sexuality and gender; and examples of innovative sexuality on screen and use of cinematic techniques that immerse the audience in the reality of traditionally othered characters to produce a new protagonism. Central analyses include the feature films *The Fundamentals of Caring*, and *Margarita With a Straw*, whose primary characters live with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy and Cerebral Palsy respectively; and the documentaries *Picture This* and *Sexual Healing: Inside the World of Medically Assisted Sex*, which illuminate sex and disability as authored from within the disability community. Insights gained from these analyses will be applied to the process of adapting Kim Clark's book, *A One-Handed Novel*, into a new web-series featuring a protagonist who lives with Multiple Sclerosis and receives the news that her body can only produce six more orgasms.

KEYWORDS: disability, sexuality, crip theory, gender, movies, story, filmmaker, film, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, diversity, screen-based, media, ableism, wheelchair, representation, adaptation, cinematography, LGBTQ, queer, anthropodenial, jane the virgin, switched at birth, deadpool, fundamentals of caring, margarita with a straw, andrew garza, deaf, technology, casting, actors, equity, masculinity, robert mcruer, martin f. norden, martha nussbaum, rosabeth moss kanter, kim clark, jonathan evison, rob burnett

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1 Introduction

I met Kim Clark in 2011 when a mutual friend told me the premise of a novella that Clark wrote called “Six Degrees of Altered Sensation”, which was due for publication that winter. The premise I heard was: A woman receives a diagnosis that her body can only have six more orgasms. (Clark, *Six Degrees of Altered Sensation*, 2011) I panicked. *Somebody is going to turn that into a film*, I thought, *and I need it to be me*. I read the manuscript and fell in love with Mel, the protagonist who lives with multiple sclerosis (MS) and has so many raunchy adventures that I felt challenged to raise the bar on my own fun quotient. I met Clark via Skype and learned that she lives in Nanaimo BC, has had MS since her 40s, and is dedicated to writing about “disease and desire”. I fell in love with her, too. I optioned “Six Degrees of Altered Sensation”, by then published within a collection of short stories titled *Attemptations: Short, Long and Longer Stories* and have subsequently adapted it into a feature film screenplay, “The Last Six”, which is currently undergoing development with the support of The Harold Greenberg Fund and Creative BC. Written as a dark comedy for a mainstream audience, The Last Six focuses on Mel’s sexual conundrum of six remaining orgasms and only peripherally addresses the larger issue of disability – in this case, nerve damage resulting in limited orgasms without the MS component. In the meantime, Clark has written a sequel to the original novella, called *A One-Handed Novel*, and we want to adapt Mel’s entire story into a web-series. This version, “Disease & Desire”, will remain true to Mel’s full MS experience.

Adaption of a character’s experience from literature to screen requires consideration about what aspects of the story are key and how internal thoughts will be performed externally. As Robert McKee describes,

In either third-person or first-person, the novelist can directly invade thoughts and feelings to dramatize the tale entirely on the landscape of the protagonist’s inner life. For the screenwriter such stories are by far the most fragile and difficult. We cannot drive a camera lens through an actor’s forehead and photograph his thoughts, although there are those who would try. Somehow, we must lead the audience to interpret the inner life from outer behaviour without loading the soundtrack with expositional narration or stuffing the mouths of characters with self-explanatory dialogue. As John Carpenter said, “Movies are about making mental things physical.” (McKee, 1997, pp. 43-44)

Among the considerations for this undertaking is Mel’s experience of living with progressive MS. This disease has outwardly visible characteristics, which communicate a person’s daily negotiations to

a viewer and can translate well for a visual medium. Of course, the disease also affects every facet of life from inner thoughts and self-perception to finance, relationships and mobility. In order to serve Clark's material successfully, I have embarked on a research project to understand how various embodied differences are portrayed in screen-based media, and to examine the importance of telling stories inclusive of physical diversity. There are many good research papers about the representation of diversity on screen, and how disability is the last subset that needs to be included in our cultural understanding of "diversity" at this moment when the entertainment industry is being held publicly accountable for cultural violations. To focus my research, I paid the most attention to films, television shows, documentaries and online videos made within the last five years, meaning roughly since 2014. I also encountered varying definitions of disability ranging from the broad terminology used by the Canadian Government, "any severe and prolonged condition that inhibits a person from performing normal and routine daily activities" (Canada, n.d.), to specific lists of conditions spanning from obesity to paralysis found in a variety of reports and studies on the subject. I chose to focus primarily on media that depicts the definition used in the *Ruderman White Paper on Employment of Actors with Disabilities in Television*, which is "focused largely on visible and congenital disabilities" (Kopić & Woodburn, 2016). This is primarily because Clark's material addresses conditions with visible manifestations, and visible disabilities are the most common in historical cinematic depictions.

1.1 A word about language

Throughout this thesis I use the words "filmmaker" and "creator" interchangeably and as umbrella terms to indicate the various production roles that might lead a screen-based, narrative project. Writer, Director, Creative Producer, Show Runner, Development Executive, and all compilations of these roles are responsible for establishing the vision, ethos and actualization of a film, television or video project. I hold them responsible for the overall message that is transmitted to an audience. I have adopted various terms to express the condition of a non-normative body (disability, diversely-abled, embodied difference, etc.) from the multiple authors and speakers encountered in this research. I consider the terms non-hierarchical and have chosen to use them based on the tone or intention of the writing in different sections, or on the language used by the community or voice influencing that section of my thought process.

1.2 Minority representation so far

Multiple waves of feminism, the civil rights movements, and queer theory and activism have achieved progress in broadening social and political discourse to recognize the humanity of historically marginalized and victimized populations. This work is ongoing. Using cost-effective

media technology, and most recently, the universal platform of the internet, diverse media makers present their own previously-unseen perspectives on screen for far-reaching audiences. Some of these personal projects, initially shared online purely for the sake of creative and political expression, attract so many viewers that they break into broadcast television and change the texture of what we consider mainstream. Comedians Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson created the low-budget web series *Broad City* to showcase millennial women’s humour, and their work grew to become the critically acclaimed television series of the same name, airing on Comedy Central. Issa Rae launched the web series *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl* to increase representation of black women; the series was picked up by HBO and transformed into the successful television series *Insecure*. Canadians Jordan Hall, Steph Ouaknine and Jay Bennett created the single-frame web-series *Carmilla* that combines queer culture and vampire lore; the series attracted a corporate sponsor in Kotex and led to the festival-award-winning feature film, *The Carmilla Movie*. Writers Amy Fox, Wren Handman and Shevon Singh originated a web series featuring transgender characters of various cultural backgrounds called *The Switch* that was picked up for broadcast on the OutTV network. These are just a few examples of online-to-mainstream success stories that expand screen diversity, amid hundreds of shows that remain in web-series format and attract millions of viewers globally – *Brown Girls*, *Brooklyn. Blue. Sky.*, *The FOB and I*, *Quiet Tiny Asian*, *The Pineapple Diaries*, *Couple-ish*, *Her Story* and *Before I Got Famous* are just a few. Showrunner Shonda Rhimes, a black woman who, beginning in the mid-2000s, has created some of the most successful American television on air, has also tapped into an audience that appreciates seeing the full range of human diversity on screen. Rhimes’ casting choices and storylines have won her membership in the Television Academy Hall of Fame and status as the highest paid showrunner in television in 2018, among countless industry awards. The key to her success is practical. In an interview for *Elle* magazine she says, “When I started writing TV shows, I wanted to represent everybody, because it should look like the real world. It should feel normal when you turn on the television and see people who look like you.” (Elle Nov. 2018) Rhimes is a substantial player in moving the needle for on-screen characters of colour and of diverse sexual orientation. *Where We Are on TV: 2018-2019* from GLAAD reports,

the percentage of LGBTQ series regulars on broadcast primetime scripted programming is up to an all-time high of 8.8 percent. That same group of characters is also at gender parity with equal percentages of LGBTQ men and women on broadcast, and for the first time ever, there are more LGBTQ characters who are people of color than white LGBTQ characters on broadcast. Across all platforms GLAAD tracks – broadcast, cable, and streaming – the number of bisexual+

characters, transgender characters, and characters with HIV and AIDS are up this year.

This good news is juxtaposed with the sentence, “GLAAD and Harris Poll’s *Accelerating Acceptance* study shows that 20 percent of Americans 18-34 identify as LGBTQ, a key demo for networks.” Despite the success of Rhimes’ approach and the bankability of films with female stars (*Wonder Woman*, *The Hunger Games*) or those featuring people of colour (*Crazy Rich Asians*, *Black Panther*), the majority of top grossing American films still vastly underrepresent women, people of colour, LGBTQ people, and people with disabilities in proportion to the North American population that consumes those same films. Progress is more evident in the increasing numbers of smaller-scale films and television shows where minority representation is evident, some of which are reflected in Mediaversity’s top rated shows. Mediaversity is an online rating platform that reviews and scores film and television media for diverse character representation. (Lai, n.d.) Their database is far from exhaustive, however at the end of 2018 the 195 projects reviewed between 2016 and 2018 included a well-balanced mix of shows with high social impact (popular and award-winning) and shows with inclusive representation. Reviewers note the diversity of the content creators and award points in categories titled Technical (execution of the story), Gender (does it pass the Bechdel Test), Race, LGBTQ, and bonus points for inclusion of Age, Disability and Body Diversity. Appendix 7.1 shows the detailed breakdown of Mediaversity’s grading system. 65 of the rated shows have so far earned B+ or higher, including popular titles like *Black Panther*, *Superstore*, *Hidden Figures*, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, *Kim’s Convenience*, *Orange is the New Black*, *Queen Sugar*, *Master of None*, *Moonlight*, *Killing Eve* and *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*. Clearly, we are making progress in the direction of thoughtful inclusion in screen-based storytelling. The existence of Black Entertainment network (BET), OutTV and Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) signals a commitment to employ diverse content creators and serve audiences who want stories reflective of their distinct realities. Within all of this positive progress, however, individuals with disabilities are the least represented demographic on screen.

People living with visible and non-visible disabilities express a range of identities that are just as fluid and subjective as those that define gender, sexual orientation and race. The Women’s Media Centre published a 2017 article titled *Disability and Hollywood, a Sordid Affair* that reads, “On the rare occasion that a disabled character is given a major storyline, it is always one of three plots: ‘You can’t love me because I’m disabled!’ ‘Heal me!’ or ‘Better off dead.’ ” The article continues,

The disabled community is the largest minority group in America and by far the most underrepresented in media. According to the Annenberg Report, only 2.4 percent of speaking roles [in American feature films] were disabled in 2016. It gets better: only 19 percent of those were disabled women, and absolutely none of them

were LGBT [...] Last awards season, when the Oscars got roasted for being so white, Academy president Cheryl Boone Isaacs released a statement committing to diversify the Academy. She mandated the inclusion of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation – but not disability. (Zayid, 2017)

The link between media representation of a human experience and cultural value assigned to that human's identity is well documented. The *Ruderman White Paper on Employment of Actors with Disabilities in Television* notes that while “18.7% of Americans live with a disability, at 0.9% of representation among regular television characters, this is a grossly disproportionate under-representation of the largest minority in the country.” The paper explains,

Considering the reach and power of television, this kind of exclusion has significant consequences. A literature review of people's attitudes toward people with disabilities was published in *Research in Developmental Disabilities* in December of 2013. The researchers—Michelle Clare Wilson and Katrina Scior—looked specifically at the span of a decade (2003-2013) and only at studies that used the Implicit Association Test (IAT), a reliable and valid measuring tool for unconscious attitudes and bias. Their results showed that “[a]cross all studies, moderate to strong negative implicit attitudes were found.” In other words, all study participants on average had negative associations with people with disabilities. What is more interesting, and also not surprising, is that caregivers as well as able-bodied students in inclusive classrooms held more positive unconscious attitudes. The positive attitudes were contingent on exposure and interaction. The more time someone spent with people with disabilities, the more their implicit associations improved. These results contribute to the body of evidence that has been amassed since the 1950s when Gordon Allport proposed the Contact Hypothesis. Broadly speaking, the hypothesis “suggests that increased contact with out-group members can help to improve attitudes towards them.” (Kopić & Woodburn, 2016)

The Contact Hypothesis is being exemplified in North American media's current zeitgeist for transgender representation. In 2014, writer/director Jill Soloway debuted the series *Transparent* on the new Amazon Prime streaming platform and made history by placing a transgender protagonist at the centre of an episodic family drama. The series earned multiple Golden Globe and Emmy awards for cast and crew, and is the first show produced by a streaming media service to win a Golden Globe award for Best Series. It is also credited as influencing the social and political sea-change regarding transgender acceptance.

In the months that followed the premiere of *Transparent's* first season, transgender rights became part of the national conversation. As had been depicted on Netflix's *Orange Is the New Black*, the mistreatment of trans people in prison made headlines and drew derision from stars like Elton John and Michael Stipe. And a number of television documentary series on the subject came out, including the Ryan Seacrest-produced *Becoming Us* (originally *My Transparent Life*), *Laverne Cox Presents: The T Word* and singer Laura Jane Grace's *True Trans*. Then, [in] April, Caitlyn Jenner – now the most prominent transgender celebrity – came out in a *20/20* interview with Diane Sawyer. (Grow, 2015)

Jenner's public personal life, the increasingly transgender cast of *Transparent* and other television shows dedicated to casting transgender actors in transgender roles, like *Orange Is the New Black*, are normalizing the trans experience in North American culture. Cisgender (i.e. not transgender) actor, Jay Duplass who plays Josh Pfefferman on *Transparent*, writes that his daily collegiality with trans artists has profoundly altered his personal view of the world.

"I've been told that Josh's love interest in Shea [played by transgender actor Trace Lysette] is quite possibly the first of its kind on television. A cisgender man takes interest in a trans woman simply because he is attracted to her ... not a fetish, not a secret, not an experiment. Shea is simply a woman who's come into Josh's lonely world at the right place and the right time.... Like Josh, I now experience the wide spectrum of gender on a daily basis, when only a few years ago it seemed like one of two boxes to check at the doctor's office. On *Transparent*, I work closely with LGBTQ and gender nonconforming people who are now my close friends — truth be told, we're all more like family. So when I'm asked what it's like to have an onscreen romance with a trans woman, my reaction is often something akin to, "Oh, you mean Trace? I guess I forgot she's trans." But it wasn't always this way. I grew up in a small, old-school Catholic world, imprinted with an above-average number of categories and judgments. I wasn't exposed to trans people in media or real life, didn't even know any openly gay people until college, and I've had fewer sexual partners in my life than Josh has in season one. So yeah, *Transparent* opened my heart and my mind, but it also changed my world. (Duplass, 2017)

Cancellation of *Transparent* after accusations of sexual misconduct against the show's leading actor, Jeffrey Tambour, highlights the essential work still required to change attitudes and behaviour about the respect that is due to people inhabiting diverse bodies. The transparency of the demise of Soloway's show and their eagerness to share the lessons learned in the memoir *She Wants It*, which

documents both the rise and fall of the show and Soloway's personal journey into transgender and queer culture, are part of a wave of media-makers leading a transformation in how we tell stories and whose stories get told. There has not yet been a breakout television show featuring a visibly disabled protagonist that has affected public discourse to this degree. Several new series featuring teenaged protagonists with diverse abilities have entered the arena and do good work to normalize disability experiences for a mainstream audience. However, for the most part they conform to normative standards for a primetime television show. They walk the "edutainment" line, which assumes that mainstream audiences must feel safe in order to learn new lessons. In other words, they present the diversely-abled characters through an able-bodied lens. I propose that the deep impact of *Transparent* is partly due to its assumption that an audience can handle being immersed in the transgender characters' vibrant reality. There was no hand-holding. Now is a prime moment for realistic, first-person disability stories to enter the public's consciousness. By showing more, and more varied, differently-abled characters on screen, these stories can come to be understood as fundamental to the multifaceted human experience.

1.3 Crip sexuality on screen

Awareness of the need for more representation of physical diversity on screen is beginning to penetrate social discourse. Progress can be measured by the mainstream success of shows like *Breaking Bad*, which includes the character of the protagonist's son, Walter White, Jr. played by actor RJ Mitte who lives with cerebral palsy. Over five seasons, Walter White, Jr. is defined more broadly than the scope of his disability, and many friends to whom I mention this research project remark that they had forgotten about his cerebral palsy; they simply acclimatize to his personification within the story. Characters with various physical diversities are gradually becoming more accepted, although they are still a significant minority on screen, as documented by the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative in their annual research publications on the subject. Beyond quotas in relation to non-disabled characters, I am interested in the quality of these characters, particularly the inclusion of their sexuality. We currently inhabit a culture that values sexual expression and the pursuit of pleasure as fundamental to a holistic sense of self. Psychotherapist Esther Perel writes,

[We are] beneficiaries of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, women's liberation, the availability of birth control pills, and the emergence of the gay movement. With the widespread use of the pill, sex became liberated from reproduction. Feminism and gay pride fought to define sexual expression as an inalienable right. Anthony Giddens describes this transition in *The Transformation of Intimacy* when he explains that sexuality became a property of the self, one that we develop, define, and

renegotiate throughout our lives. Today, our sexuality is an open-ended personal project; it is part of who we are, an identity, and no longer merely something we do. It has become a central feature of intimate relationships, and sexual satisfaction, we believe, is our due. The era of pleasure has arrived. (Perel, *Mating in Captivity: Unlocking Erotic Intelligence*, 2006, p. 8)

In order to properly include people with embodied differences in our understanding of how humans live our fully realized selves, we must acknowledge their sexual expression – however it takes form. Women and people of colour on screen (and in literature) have historically been de-sexualized or hyper-sexualized by white, male media-makers. The renovation of this reductive binary is becoming an essential concern for progressive filmmakers, particularly as more women and people of colour are afforded the space to tell their own stories. Similarly, the limited representations of disability in contemporary media, which call for a more diverse understanding of the disability experience, are the legacy of historical representations of disabled people and their sexuality that has been reduced to one of two polarized identities according to the needs of the storyteller. In *The Sexualized Body of the Child*, Michel Desjardins explains,

During the past two hundred years [...] two rival images have been used to legitimize the containment of the sexuality of these people: the seraphic idiot and the Mephistophelic idiot. The seraphic idiot is a person labeled intellectually disabled who is believed to be an eternal child: pure and asexual, guileless and fragile, and unable to face the dangers of sexuality. In contrast, the Mephistophelic idiot is a wild and diabolical being, halfbeast and half-demon, dominated by instincts, without morals or law, concupiscent and libidinous, whose hyper-sexuality jeopardizes the security of the social order. (Desjardins, 2012)

Examples of these historical characters that are sustained in contemporary popular culture can be found in the Broadway musical, *The Phantom of the Opera*, and in the Christmas story, *A Christmas Carol*. Erik, also known as the Angel of Music, was originally conceived in the novel, *The Phantom of the Opera* by Gaston Leroux in 1910. Since then, he has been kept alive on the page and on screen until he rose to rock-star popularity on stage, as adapted by Andrew Lloyd Webber in 1986. This tempestuous Mephistophelic idiot hides his physical disfigurement by living underground, masked. His ravenous obsession with a gifted young singer wreaks havoc on many lives, causes deaths, and destroys a Paris opera house. In contrast, the beloved seraphic idiot Tiny Tim, originally written by Charles Dickens in the 1843 novella, “A Christmas Carol”, is crippled, asexual, and represents all that is good, innocent and worth protecting in the world. He is celebrated annually in countless Christmas pageants that position Tim’s frailty and pure heart as a reminder of the spirit of guileless generosity.

On screen, the history of characters with visible disabilities dates to the beginnings of cinema. Martin F. Norden traces the films, filmmakers, and narrow spectrum of expression available to diversely-abled characters in *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies*. Other than a very few exceptions, these were supporting characters whose purpose was to highlight the good fortune of the able-bodied protagonists. Norden acknowledges the polarities that Desjardins describes, and notices that from the cinema's early days, the choice of which characteristics get assigned to a fictional character is often determined by gender.

With the rise of the film d'art, filmmakers began experimenting with images based on famous literary works and developed types that for the most part represented either consummate villainy or consummate innocence – a dichotomy based rather conspicuously on gender. The industry's infantilization of women and villainization of men through disability, presented in only rudimentary form during the medium's earliest stages, would undergo significant development during and immediately after the years that marked the carnage of World War 1. (Norden, 48)

In defiant opposition to these stereotypes, the female protagonist of Clark's *A One-Handed Novel* is lusty, embodied, both reasonable and passionate, and unapologetic about her sexual enthusiasm. In fact, the story hinges on how she will spend her last six orgasms while inhabiting a progressively disabled body.

However small the subculture of sex advocates is within the subculture of disability advocacy, Clark is not a lone voice speaking up for the full sexual humanity of those living with physical diversity. A 2014 memoir from Kaleigh Trace, a (dis)abled, queer, feminist sex educator, addresses why it's vital for her, and for those like her, to claim and to talk about sex.

If I were to believe everything I see, then I would believe that sex only happens between thin people. Only men with abdominal muscles do it. Only women with big tits get to bang. Men and women only do it with each other. Sex is for straight people, and sex only ever happens between two of them, never more or fewer than that. Sex is for white people. Sex is for pretty people. Sex is for able-bodied young people. Sex is spontaneous. Sex involves penetration. Sex lasts approximately 4.2 minutes. Sex happens in bedrooms, at night. Sex is predictable.

As a sex-positive, feminist sex educator, I find myself talking about the realities of real life sex all the time. And what I have found is that people think it is really embarrassing. Nobody seems to want to talk about the intricate and human and silly things that happen when we try to stick our bodies together. And so, in response, I

talk louder and louder and louder and LOUDER. My mouth gets more filthy. I try to push boundaries even further. I want to be even bolder, because I believe that this shaming silence that surrounds our collective sex lives is what leads to us all having bad sex. It is why we judge other people's sexuality. It is why we don't know how to respect one another's bodies and one another's boundaries. It is why we don't know what consent can look like, and why sexual assault and rape can happen. It is why homophobia persists and why transphobia exists. (Trace, 2014, pp. 5-6)

Trace's line of thinking advocates that broadening our understanding of how sex gets expressed is beneficial for every human living within the spectrum of infinite physical variety. Norden identifies a few examples of romantic relations between able-bodied and disabled characters on screen, most often ill-fated. However, he calls attention to the 1978 feature film, *Coming Home*, as the first time that sexual relations involving a disabled character were shown on screen. In the era of films that examine the Vietnam War, *Coming Home* explores "a ménage à trois formed by Sally Hyde (Jane Fonda), a bored military wife and V.A. hospital volunteer; Bob Hyde (Bruce Dern), her husband and a Marine captain who cannot wait to return to Vietnam; and Luke Martin (Jon Voight), a tempestuous Vietnam veteran paralyzed from the waist down" (Norden, 1994, p. 267):

Coming Home courageously takes on one of moviedom's hitherto undefined areas of the physically disabled experience: sexual expression. In detailing the affair between Luke and Sally, (climaxing, as it were, with Sally's orgasm while the Beatles' "Strawberry Fields" plays in the background), the film was one of the first – if not *the* first – to deal explicitly with a physically disabled person's sexual encounters. Among its numerous positive effects, *Coming Home* convincingly affirmed that disabled people are indeed sexual beings and set the stage for movies of the 1980s and beyond to explore the concept further. (Norden, 1994, p. 268)

Coming Home is ground-breaking for showing a paraplegic man's positive sexual expression as fundamental to his engaging, complicated character. The lovemaking between Luke and Sally is an essential story point that allows each of them to share aspects of their personalities, spirits and bodies that aren't welcome elsewhere in their lives. The scene is tender and includes dialogue of consent and care for both characters – female and disabled. Many of the male characters in *Coming Home* live with disabilities acquired in the war. Their humanity is affirmed by innovative cinematography from Director of Photography, Haskell Wexler. Rather than placing the camera at the height of an able-bodied viewer looking down on the amputees and paraplegic men, the camera in *Coming Home* positions the viewer as aligned with the amputees. The result is immersive and includes the audience in the reality of the "other":

Concerned about the way he photographed the vets, Wexler devised a special camera dolly that placed the camera at the same height as the men in wheelchairs. He was thus able to film them in a straightaway fashion, thereby avoiding high camera angles and the powerlessness that they often ascribe to their subjects. (Norden, 1994, p. 268)

An empathetic camera frame is a powerful tool to dissolve barriers between characters with and without disabilities on screen, and between characters and audience. Many of the screen-based narratives in this research include innovative cinematic techniques that are fundamental to humanizing characters who live with embodied differences. Given that characters with physical diversity are still such a novelty on screen, and that cinematic language is in its infancy regarding how to include those characters as protagonists, I have often been distracted away from paying attention to the sexuality of those characters when they appear, simply to examine their representation. On the other hand, in some of the films that succeed, the joy of immersion in a compelling story is equally distracting from my academic analysis; however, I have done my best to notice how characters are realized beyond their physical limitations as full humans, inclusive of sexual desire or desirability. The media samples discussed here include: examples of sexuality that appears progressive, but upon examination actually support rules for sexuality and gender that are maintained through heteronormative and able-bodied hegemony; and examples of innovative ideas about sexuality on screen and use of cinematic techniques that include the audience in the reality of traditionally “othered” characters. I adopted the measurement of a character’s sexuality offered in the annual reports published by USC Annenberg that evaluate representations of gender, race/ethnicity, LGBT, disabilities and age in the 100 most profitable American feature films.

1.4 What qualifies as “sexuality”?

The Annenberg Inclusion Initiative at USC Annenberg, led by Dr. Stacy L. Smith, releases an annual report that analyses the 100 top-grossing American feature films from each preceding year for “on screen prevalence and portrayal of females, underrepresented racial/ethnic groups, the LGBT community, and individuals with disabilities.” In the 2018 publication, *Inequality in 1,100 Popular Films: examining portrayals of gender, race/ethnicity, LGBT and disability from 2007-2017* the findings regarding representations of disability in the 2017 sample of movies are as follows:

- Only 2.5% of all characters were depicted with a disability across the 100 most popular movies of 2017.

- Forty-one films in 2017 did not feature one speaking character with a disability. A total of 78 movies did not include one female character with a disability. Two films featured characters with disabilities in proportion to the U.S. population (18.7%).
- 14 movies featured a lead or co lead character with a disability at any point in the film. The majority of films with lead or co lead characters with a disability featured males and few females. Only 1 film revolved around an underrepresented leading character with a disability and 1 a leading character from the LGBT community.
- Physical disabilities were depicted most often, with 61.6% of characters with a disability included in this category. Communicative disabilities occurred for 30.4% of characters. Finally, 26.8% of characters with disabilities were classified in the mental domain.
- More than two-thirds (69.6%) of characters with disabilities were male while 30.4% were female. Nearly three-quarters of characters with disabilities were white, while 27% were underrepresented. Only 1 character shown with a disability was LGBT. Only the percentage of female characters with a disability has increased meaningfully since 2015.

The miniscule number of characters with a disability in the Annenberg sample of films is unsurprising; Norden writes that the Hollywood film studio system has never been at the forefront of social progress:

As film historians Leonard Quart and Albert Auster have argued, “Hollywood, hardly noted for its realistic screen treatment of racial and ethnic minorities and women, has not been any more sensitive or illuminating in its portrayal of the disabled.” (Norden, 1)

In opposition to this big-budget disparity, however, there are plenty of films from independent American filmmakers, and from other countries that make up for this stark lack of representation. Regarding the sexuality of on-screen characters specifically, the Annenberg report analyzes a fictional character’s sexuality in a few of their research areas. They consider the “sexualization of characters” by noticing sexually revealing clothing, nudity, and any references to physical attractiveness. Presumably, this would be the character’s own commentary or behaviour indicating their self-perception as sexual, or commentary or behaviour from other characters about the attractiveness of

the character in question. Smith et al also report on sexual and gender identity, and include the useful phrase “apparent sexuality captures enduring romantic and/or sexual interest in men, women, or both.” To synthesize these criteria for my purposes, I propose that the sexuality of a character with a disability is included in their portrayal when another character finds them sexually attractive, when the character with disability expresses a sexual desire of any kind, and/or when the filmmaker embraces that character’s sexuality through cinematic devices like costume, lighting or camerawork. In essence, I consider any reference that the character is sexuality desirable or possesses sexual appetite.

1.5 Adaptation of “A One-Handed Novel” for screen

Imagine you're given the news that your body's only capable of six more orgasms. “It's either buck up or fuck up,” Mel decides as she plots to make the most of her last six kicks at the can – while living with the challenges of progressive Multiple Sclerosis. (Clark, Kim Clark So far..., n.d.)

Mel is the feisty, 40ish, more-than-slightly manic protagonist of Kim Clark’s novella “Six Degrees of Altered Sensation” published in *Attemptations: short, long and longer stories* in 2011, and of the sequel, *A One-Handed Novel*, published in 2018. Together we are adapting Mel and her adventures for screen as a web-series with the working title “Disease & Desire”. Mel is a sexually assertive woman with multiple sclerosis (MS). She makes no apologies for living in the same world as everyone else. Disease & Desire follows Mel and her squad of friends and freaks through MS-y escapades with sex, friendship, travel, career, money, achievement, defeat, inheritance, home and body. The web-series will offer adult audiences an entertaining online narrative led by a powerful and engaging protagonist whose physicality and sexuality are a sucker-punch to limiting, historical representations of disability. The show will have a realistic tone, use actors with disabilities where appropriate, and relish in Mel’s gritty humour and weird choices. Mel doesn’t want pity, she might need a light, and she definitely wants to know what you’re up to later. There is enough content in *A One-Handed Novel* for nine seasons of programming; each season will be approximately one hour of story divided into 5-10-minute episodes. The first phase is the adaptation of Chapter 2 from *A One-Handed Novel* titled “Chicken in Mourning”, embellished with a few story elements taken from a stage-play version that Clark wrote in 2014. This opening chapter sets up Mel’s condition and embarks on her first explicit sexual adventure. Mel has friends with and without disabilities, clients and challenges that will give viewers of all abilities a chance to see themselves deal with, learn about, or not deal with diversely-abled realities.

As documented in the Annenberg report, on-screen characters with disabilities are more often male than female. Women's sexuality is still a problematic topic on screen, especially when authored by the majority of big-budget American content creators who are straight, cisgender men. Clark's personal experience of MS and her sense of humour and adventure result in some raunchy and inventive storylines that contribute to a new wave of women's storytelling on screen. Shows like *SMILF*, from creator Frankie Shaw, and *I Love Dick*, from creator Jill Solway, are bringing "the female gaze" to the forefront of innovation in cinematic and narrative technique. Mel's journey is propelled by the circumstances of her physical condition, but her identity and imagination are much broader than physical limitations. The story begins with a fictional diagnosis of six remaining orgasms – the result of nerve deterioration from progressive MS – along with non-fictional circumstances like mobility loss. Mel responds to this news with intensified focus on her sexual pleasure in order to make the most of her remaining opportunities. Her goal of pleasure-seeking juxtaposes with the physical challenges of a progressive disease and the financial stress that comes from loss of work opportunities because of the MS. In the first chapter of this journey, Mel receives the orgasm diagnosis, hosts a dinner party while subverting the emotional shock of the diagnosis, meets a sex worker who specializes in clients with disability, and confronts her friends about their perception of her desirability. The storyline provides opportunities to see a woman living with MS in her home performing mundane domestic activities, with her physician discussing her condition, performing socially for her friends, and sexually active with a partner.

A prominent benefit of adapting Mel's life for the screen is the consistent visual awareness of her physical condition; on the page, Clark needs to constantly remind a reader what Mel's physical challenges are while she moves through the story. Alongside this opportunity, there are specific aspects of the story that require careful consideration, and these have focused my choices about which media samples to use for this research project. The challenge of adapting a character with disability from literature to screen motivated my deep dive into the novel *The Revised Fundamentals of Caring* by Jonathan Evison that was adapted into the feature film, *The Fundamentals of Caring* by writer/director Rob Burnett. Evison's personal experience as a care provider informed his literary version of Trevor, a young man living with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy. Evison writes from a place of authority about DMD, as does Clark about MS. I am in a similar position to Burnett in that I don't live with disability, nor do I have personal experience of caring for someone who does. My analysis of this adaptation process reveals what can go wrong under these conditions. As noted in the Annenberg reports, audiences are still unaccustomed to sexuality on screen that is authored by women, even less so when it coincides with disability, and this is a primary motivation for both Clark and me to make *Disease & Desire*. With this in mind I paid particular attention to *Margarita With a*

Straw, whose protagonist lives with cerebral palsy and identifies as a bisexual woman. *Margarita With a Straw* was written and directed by Shonali Bose, an Indian woman who wanted to explore the fluidity of her protagonist's desires. The Disease & Desire storyline addressing sex work and disability is microscopically rare in mainstream culture. The short documentary *Sexual Healing: Inside the World of Medically Assisted Sex* provided valuable insight regarding both a client's and provider's motivations and experiences of transactional sexual services. And I am interested in innovative cinematic techniques that give agency to the characters with disabilities in order to establish diversely-abled protagonism on screen. *Switched at Birth*, *The Little Death* and *Master of None* feature segments with inventive technical approaches that bring an audience into the diversely-able character's somatic reality. This group of screen-based media, supplemented by a few other films and videos, form the foundation of my analysis about how to successfully bring Disease & Desire to life on screen.

2 Infinite human variety: Representation in scripted drama & documentary narratives

Clark's material feeds my curiosity about the majority of humanity that falls outside the commercially defined criteria of who is attractive and sexually viable, and invites exploration of what happens when an independent woman follows her truest desires, given her available resources. Her story is full of plot, which makes it easy to realize for a visual/auditory medium. Her priorities for this adaptation project are to increase the availability of female protagonists and protagonists with disabilities on screen; that the characters are realistic in that they're not consistently nice or happy or cranky or funny or consumed with their disabilities, but have as much emotional variety as anybody else; and that they are smart and have the same ratio of challenge and success as any other on-screen character. With the time allowed for story and character development over the course of a television or web series, compared to the finite timespan of a film, our desire for a gradual evolution in Mel's journey is realistic. We are both fascinated by the social interactions that make up a woman's life over time; how friendships evolve, how attractions play out, how decisions are made and pursued, and how a body is inhabited. As an able-bodied person collaborating on material about disability experiences, I want to maintain the accuracy and vitality of Clark's characters in this adaptation from page to screen. In order to do so, I want to be aware of how other filmmakers who approach similar material fulfill their responsibilities, what pitfalls to avoid in on-screen representations, how audiences with disability experience respond to various screen portrayals, and to gain awareness of how people living with diverse ability express themselves on screen when afforded the opportunity to author their own sexual stories. The following media examinations include fiction and non-fiction from a variety of countries. These samples represent a much broader pool of screen-based narratives that I have spent time with in the course of this study, and present opportunities to discuss the key issues of my concern.

2.1 The (Revised) Fundamentals of Caring: Adaptation & implicit ableism

In *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, Robert McRuer develops the notion of "crip theory," which proposes that characters with disabilities, on the rare occasion that they appear in mainstream cinema and television, are most often positioned to juxtapose and therefore affirm the heteronormative identity of the able-bodied protagonist(s). He criticizes the neoliberal value of "flexibility" – as in the ability to remain intact in the presence of an Other – as a decoy for affirmation of the white-male-able-heterosexual hegemony:

[...] despite the fact that homosexuality and disability clearly share a pathologized past, and despite a growing awareness of the intersections between queer theory and disability studies, little notice has been taken of the connection between heterosexuality and able-bodied identity. Able-bodiedness, even more than heterosexuality, still largely masquerades as a nonidentity, as the natural order of things. (McRuer, 2006, p. 1)

Through this lens, films that at first glance appear progressive for inclusion of characters with embodied differences are often revealed as supportive of the status quo – perhaps even when the source narrative offered truly progressive opportunities. *The Revised Fundamentals of Caregiving* is a novel written by Jonathan Evison, originally published in 2012. The protagonist is middle-aged Ben, caregiver to Trevor, a 19-year-old man who lives with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy (DMD). We meet Ben in the aftermath of losing his child, his marriage, and his career as a stay-at-home father, which leads him to seek employment while he rehabilitates his spirit. During the moment of their lives that the story covers, the two men are positioned as comrades, often physically seated side by side, observing the world. They are each designing identity – Ben as divorced and childless; Trevor as sexually active and in new relationship with his estranged father. The first half of the book is located at home, the second half takes them on a road trip where they collect passengers and expansive experiences. Evison worked as a caregiver for several years in his early career, and his familiarity with the physical and emotional intimacy involved in this role is apparent in his writing. His description of Trevor is unsentimental, human, independent of his caregiver’s emotional state, and includes physical descriptions that are both pragmatic and compassionate. Evison’s intention for writing Trevor into life was a hope “that the book, and the deep humanity of Trev, will help in part to alleviate our culture’s marginalization of people with disabilities” (Werris, 2012).

Writer/director Rob Burnett adapted this story for the screen as the feature film *The Fundamentals of Caring*, released in 2016. In Burnett’s words, “In this, Ben (Paul Rudd) is every bit as damaged as Trevor (Craig Roberts). Neither of them are going to get better, neither of them are particularly interested in helping one another - at least in the beginning. So, there's just something so lovely about that - that bond and the tiniest bit of growth for the two of them” (Gosney, 2016). The screen version of Trevor reflects several disability stereotypes that regress the narrative of how people with physical diversity are perceived from the book’s original portrayal. The hierarchical “better” of an able-bodied experience is a hegemonic opinion that erases the humanity lived by many diversely abled humans. In *Brilliant Imperfections* Eli Clare writes about the violence that the idea of “cure” enacts on people with disabilities. He quotes disability activist Harriet McBryde Johnson, who writes,

Are [disabled people] worse off? I don't think so. Not in any meaningful sense. There are too many variables. For those of us with congenital conditions, disability shapes all we are. Those disabled later in life adapt. We take constraints that no one would choose and build rich and satisfying lives within them. We enjoy pleasures other people enjoy, and pleasures particularly our own. We have something the world needs." (Clare, 2017, p. 26)

This humanity and pleasure are evident in Evison's literary version of Trevor. However, Burnett's comparison of Ben's grief, which will subside over time, and which does not elicit unwanted staring from strangers, with Trevor's genetic condition and reliance on bulky technology for survival, simplifies the complexity of both men's challenges – one temporal and one permanent. The "tiniest bit of growth" that Burnett feels is possible for Trevor points to a reductive perception of the character he has taken responsibility to represent on screen. In contrast, the literary origins of both Ben and Trevor are nuanced, compassionate and complicated. A close read of the film in comparison with the source material reveals that the adaptation of this story from novel to screen introduces problematic disability representations that reverse the author's original intentions. There are four specific scenes in the film that reflect historical disability beliefs and keep alive a hegemonic bias that able-bodiedness is a preferred state to be aspired to. Interestingly, these moments also affirm a traditional masculinity that Trevor will never achieve as long as he lives within the limitations of his disease. They align *The Fundamentals of Caring* with McRuer's theory that crip and queer are intertwined in their service of heteronormative able-bodiedness. This story is about the emotional lives of two heterosexual men and the physical intimacy – leading to emotional intimacy – that the condition of one of them necessitates. I wonder if the feminizing state of disability allows tenderness between men in a way that the rules of able-bodied heteronormativity prohibit. Both characters come out as straight early in the movie through commentary about women's bodies, and thus affirm their opposition to queerness. One of the men is vulnerable through no fault of his own (although the film brings this into question), and so caregiving is permissible. Within this delicate balance of identities, men can touch each other, non-violently, without complicating their heterosexual masculinity.

Anthropodenial and scatological obsession

The Revised Fundamentals of Caregiving opens with Ben's interview with Trevor and his mother, Elsa, for the role of Trevor's caregiver. "Trevor is looking for a provider he can relate to," Elsa explains. "Somebody with similar interests" (Evison 4). The focus of the ensuing scene is the camaraderie established between Trevor and Ben, which starts to take hold when Elsa leaves the room after teasing that Trevor's interests include liking girls:

“I’m crippled, not gay,” he says. “Of course I like girls.”

I check the doorway. “What kind of girls?”

“Any kind,” he says. “The kind that would want to get with a guy like me.”

“You mean, because of your... because of your wheelchair?”

“I mean because I’m horny. But yeah, that too. Do you have a wife?”

“Not exactly. Well, technically yes, but – long story.”

“Is she hot?” (Evison, 2015, pp. 5-6)

Trevor’s valuation of his wheelchair as secondary to his libido establishes the order in which these ideas are discussed for the rest of the story. Rather than demote himself to a less masculine status than able-bodied Ben, Trevor pairs being crippled with liking girls and broadens the spectrum of male heterosexuality to include men like himself. He is not in denial about his condition, he uses plain language that others are free to adopt, and he is more interested in what’s possible than what’s not. Soon after this initial rapport is established between Ben and Trevor, chapter 2 opens with, “Now, four months after the interview, I spend anywhere from forty to sixty hours a week with Trev. We’re way past the awkward toiletry stage. Beyond the honeymoon stage” (Evison 7). The “awkward toiletry stage” is mentioned briefly three chapters later in a passage about how Ben maintains professionalism and non-judgement regardless of what is required to meet Trevor’s needs. Ben’s attitude regarding “toiletries” is described alongside Trevor’s other routine activities that Ben finds monotonous but doesn’t comment on, like watching the weather channel and choosing the same foods every day. In effect, there is no more attention given to Trevor’s bathroom activities than to any other aspect of his life.

Similarly, the film opens with Ben training to become a caregiver and then we see him interview for the role of caring for Trevor. In this depiction, however, much pain is taken to accentuate how unusual Trevor’s condition and behaviour are. Trevor enters the room screaming and bashing his hands as if having a temper tantrum, and he wheels right into the sofa where Ben sits. Ben’s panic intensifies until Trevor drops his act to reveal that he was playing a prank in order to exacerbate any discomfort Ben might have felt about being in the company of someone crippled. The dramatic trick of heightening difference to contrast with the circumstances of an unusual normality calls attention to the self-consciousness that screen-Trevor feels about being the one in the wheelchair among two adults who are not in wheelchairs and are in no danger of being thought of as different. Trevor then challenges Ben with a question about how, for \$9/hour, Ben would wipe his ass. After an uncomfortable pause to determine if this is another joke, Ben answers that he would

wipe Trevor's ass "in such a way that no shit would remain on it" (Burnett, 2016). His sincerity and his willingness to meet Trevor's challenges impress Trevor and Elsa. Soon after this we see a montage of Ben learning to care for Trevor wherein the primary through-line involves Ben helping Trevor to use the toilet. Under upbeat music, this sequence reveals Trevor's devious humour in making tasks difficult for Ben, the routine of Trevor's days, and Ben's sincere resolve to put his able-bodiedness to good use. Heterosexual men touch each other so rarely that the novelty of this degree of intimacy seems noteworthy to Burnett. The montage highlights the relationship status determined by the physical abilities of these two characters and the physical labour that Ben employs to support Trevor's body, particularly regarding a task as ordinary and private as eliminating waste from the body. The conclusion of the montage marks Ben's accomplishment when he is finally able to smoothly transfer Trevor from his chair to the toilet, pull down his pants, and then use toilet paper with one hand to clean Trevor while supporting his body weight. The book, in contrast, skips over this lesson entirely.

Martha Nussbaum's contributions to the theory of anthropodenial are useful in understanding scatological preoccupation. She describes the human psychological evolution of self-awareness and the development of disgust at our fundamental biology:

Around the age of two or three, the infant begins to experience a very strong negative emotion directed at its own bodily waste products. Disgust has been the subject of some extremely good experimental work by Paul Rozin and others, and through a wide range of experiments they conclude that the primary objects of disgust are seen as contaminating to the self because they are reminders of our own animality: our own bodily waste products, corpses, and animals who have properties that are linked with our own waste products, animality and mortality. (Nussbaum M. C., 2008)

Disabled bodies are often perceived as helpless bodies, therefore infantile or animal-like, even when the individual is chronologically past infancy, and so can evoke these primitive feelings of disgust or diminishment. Nussbaum goes on to explain that "people seem to need a group of humans to bound themselves off against, who will come to symbolize the disgusting, the merely animal, thus bounding the dominant group off more securely from its own hatred and feared traits" (Nussbaum, 20). When we have a group to distinguish ourselves against, we are further away from our own vulnerable animality. The film's focus on the bodily-ness of Ben's interactions with Trevor highlights the differences between the men – one able to wash himself of the body's disgusting excretions and one not – and points out the vulnerability, interpreted here as humiliation, of needing assistance to care for a body shaped by muscular dystrophy. Because the book spends very little time or detail on this

aspect of the men's relationship, we can read the filmmaker's own attitude of disgust towards the details of a disability experience (or perhaps his inexperience with caring for children's bodies) and his belief that an audience will share his view that lead him to direct such attention on this aspect of Ben's employment. Ben is portrayed as admirably patient as he learns to handle Trevor's body. His own emotional vulnerability and financial strain have led him to take employment performing a job too disgusting for those with more options. In these opening scenes he is set up for the journey of evolving past the need to care for Trevor; by the end of the film we see him no longer employed as a caregiver and returned to his true (elevated) calling of writing. And yet in spite of Ben's vulnerability, his masculinity is flexible enough that he maintains dominance over Trevor throughout the film by being the one who provides the care, who leads in interactions with women, and who facilitates moments of masculinity for Trevor, as discussed below. The book doesn't gloss over Trevor's need for support and Ben's capacity to provide it, but it refrains from carrying this exchange into the men's emotional or social status. Literary-Ben doesn't view Trevor as sub-human, simply as a man whose body doesn't always cooperate. The book does include descriptions of the spectacle of navigating the world in a wheelchair, and the scowls received by able-bodied bystanders who feel inconvenienced by Trevor's presence. Evison's inclusion of this aspect of life with disability holds society responsible for the degree of self-consciousness that the Trevors of the world are burdened with. These social moments are absent from the film, where the biggest discomforts are Ben's mandate to care for Trevor's body, and Trevor's lack of confidence that a girl would want to get to know him given his physical condition. Exaggerated focus on the mundane challenges (using a toilet) and minimized focus on the social challenges (unwanted attention and rude commentary) shifts an audience's attention away from their implication in an able-bodied bias about the challenges of a person living with disabilities in the world.

Disability = lack of sexual eligibility

Another change of note between the book and the film is Trevor's reaction to meeting a real, live girl. In the book, Trevor's dialogue is dominated by his attraction to the women around him – at the mall, on television, in his fantasies. The first time that an age-appropriate female engages with him directly is in the form of teenage-runaway Dot, who seems to be on the same road trip as the protagonists. She watches Ben carry Trevor from an inaccessible road-side rest stop to his wheelchair next to their van: "Trev blushes when he notices her, no doubt embarrassed by his predicament" (Evison, 2015, p. 133). The predicament is that of being carried out of a porta-pottie – an observation on how the world excludes people with disabilities from accessing essential services. The next interaction takes place at a road-side diner where Trevor watches Dot from afar, blushes as she walks over, and when she comments "cool shoes" in passing, he "looks down at his gold Chucks,

and his eyes stick there. *Thanks*, he says, his voice threatening to crack.” When Ben later suggests they offer her a ride, Trevor’s response is “hell yes”; however, they discover she has vanished (Evison, 2015, p. 142). Their third interaction again begins with voyeurism. From his perch in front of another diner window, Trevor comments that he thinks the girl is hot, that he likes her outfit and wonders what her story is. When Dot then approaches Trevor and Ben and slides into the restaurant booth beside Trevor without ceremony, the two youths pick up a conversation as if they have already been introduced. At no point in these passages does Trevor express disbelief that Dot might like him, or a lack of confidence related to his muscular dystrophy. He is curious, turned on, and shy to the degree that any teenaged boy would be shy around a confident, worldly teenaged girl. From then on the two are friends, and eventually become romantically involved.

In the film, by contrast, the first time Trevor spots Dot (Selena Gomez) smoking outside a gas station, his face registers panic. The camera angle diminishes him and elevates Dot. When she comments on his sneakers, his panic only allows the utterance “mall”, which then becomes a joke that Ben wields to tease Trevor about his inability to engage intelligibly with women. In the scenes between this first encounter and the next, Trevor broods in silence against Ben’s teasing and then explodes with “I’m in a fucking wheelchair, okay? I could spew Shakespeare shit and a girl like that’s not going to be interested in me.” The next time they see Dot, Ben and Trevor are eating at a truck stop diner and Trevor gazes out the window with fear in his eyes. Ben follows his gaze to see Dot standing by the freeway with her thumb out. They have the following conversation:

Ben: Oh, what do you suppose her deal is?

Trevor: Obviously she wants me bad.

Ben: She’s a runaway. Her parents are looking for her. Should we give her a ride?

Trevor: What?

Ben: She’s hitchhiking. Maybe we should give her a ride. You want to?

Trevor: Well why? You think we should?

Ben: You’re probably right, we shouldn't.

Trevor: Well I didn’t say we shouldn’t, did I? I said that, you know, it’s just like whatever if you want to then I guess we can. If you’re feeling fatherly and protective and shit.

Ben: Nah, forget it.

There is a long uncomfortable pause while Trevor watches Dot and tries several times to say something. Finally –

Trevor: I'm worried about her parents.

Ben: Yeah? Worried about her parents, are you?

Trevor: Deeply, actually, cause she's out there alone. In today's world there's no telling what could happen, there's all sorts of sickos out there. And quite possibly in here.

Ben: Let's do it.

Trevor: Seriously?

Ben: Yeah. Let's give her a ride.

Trevor: Okay, yeah. Why not, right? Yeah, okay, let's do it.

Ben: Yeah. Go ask her.

Trevor: What? Me?

Ben: Yeah. You.

Trevor: No I'm not asking her. I can't ask her. I'm not asking her.

Ben: Why?

Trevor: Because I can't, okay. Don't be a dick. You ask her.

Ben: Man, if I go ask her, you're going to be watching it through this window like you're watching TV.

Another long pause while Trevor works up his courage, which emerges as defiance.

Trevor: You know when I get home, I'm going to put you on the roadside attractions map. World's Biggest Dick. (Burnett, 2016)

Trevor then wheels outside to where Dot is and wheels back inside without talking to her. Ben is finally forced to get up, approach Dot and invite her to join them inside. Trevor watches with ongoing terror in his eyes. When Dot slides into the booth beside Trevor she immediately asks, "So what's wrong with you", if the MD can be fixed, if it hurts, and if it affects his brains and his penis. The design of this scene makes clear that Trevor is terrified that an able-bodied female will find him repulsive. The camera increases Dot's importance in the frame next to Trevor's diminished position and includes Trevor in the category of disabled characters who feel they aren't worthy of being loved

by an able-bodied person. Norden documents the origins of this narrative to the days of black and white movies with stories where an able-bodied hero takes pity on a disabled Sweet Innocent character who, upon realizing that the other's charity might possibly be love, banishes herself from the relationship in order to save her able-bodied suitor from a degraded life with her. The able-bodied hero then rushes to find his foolish love and convince her that he doesn't care about her shortcomings, he still loves her, and they will face the world bravely together. Sometimes the genders were reversed – an able-bodied woman rescued a man with physical deformity, often blindness. (Norden, 1994) Trevor's transformation from open and curious in the book, to twisted with self-doubt in the film, aligns his cinematic self within the history of disability portrayed as both pitiable and self-pitying.

Masculinity overcomes disability

Perhaps the film's most insidious commentary on disability is a scene that occurs after Trevor's first date with Dot. In the book, the romantic event occurs organically after several days of close proximity during the road trip where Trevor and Dot spend time and miles together sharing their history and ideas and plans, as young people do. One evening, as the travellers tidy up in their motel rooms and prepare to head out for dinner, Trevor pulls Ben aside and asks if he can "fly solo on this one". Ben understands the desire for privacy and stays behind while the two youths head off to a restaurant, unsupervised. The next morning, Trevor withholds any details about the date, reporting that they "just talked" for five hours "about nothing really". Ben curbs his curiosity and they fall into their morning routine of watching the weather station:

And it is in this silence that Trev finally reveals himself. Monitoring him out of the corner of my eye, I see contentment written plainly on his face as he settles deep into the silence and seems to gaze right through the television screen. And maybe it's the low ceilings or just the way he's sitting with his shoulders reared back and his chin held high, but he looks less frail somehow, bigger, and I suddenly know beyond a shadow of a doubt that he kissed her and that he doesn't want to talk about it – because like all young lovers, he wants to hoard the memory, hold it so close and contained that it can never escape him. (Evison, 2015, p. 228)

Ben's respect for Trevor's rite of passage could apply to any mentor/protégé relationship, regardless of the physical condition of either participant. "Like all young lovers" includes Trevor within the diversity of his peers – of any gender, or any physicality – who cross the line from being un-kissed to kissed.

In contrast, the film turns this moment from an acknowledgement of Trevor's blossoming sexuality into a suggestion that the achievement of a normative masculine sexual interaction leads to overcoming his disability. In the film, Trevor returns from his date to where Ben waits in their motel room and they go through the motions of preparing Trevor for bed. When Ben moves to place the ventilator over Trevor's face, which has been established earlier in the film as routine, Trevor gives a simple line, "Not tonight." He is so full of confidence, manliness, from spending the evening with a woman who had previously terrified him, that his body can sustain itself without mechanical intervention while he sleeps. Ben's nod of approval acknowledges that Trevor is now in closer proximity to the ranks of men who engage romantically with women and who don't need technological support to breathe. McRuer notes this conflation of disability with character flaws in his analysis of *As Good As It Gets* and the character Melvin, who lives with obsessive compulsive disorder:

... the depiction of Melvin parallels other cultural representations of people with disabilities: his disability (the anomalous behavior for which he has been diagnosed and which sets him apart from other people) is conflated with his character flaws (his bigotry). The film marks no separation between Melvin's disability and his bigotry; on the contrary, they are reportedly linked, narratively and visually, and the link is naturalized. *As Good As It Gets* and ableist ideologies in general cannot comprehend it, of course, but there is nothing natural about this link. [...] The scene slides seamlessly from a discussion of Melvin's disability and the ways to deal with it to a discussion of his character and ways to improve it. The assumption is that overcoming his disability would improve his character; his sexism, ableism, homophobia, and racism can be treated with a pill. By representing Melvin's disability or "ailment" as his character flaw, the scene positions his story firmly in already pervasive cultural discourses of disability. (McRuer, 2006, p. 23)

The moment where Trevor's performance of heterosexual masculinity (his date with Dot) results in overcoming his need for respiratory support makes the same connection that McRuer describes. If Trevor does have in his character the ability to overcome his body's weakness, then any moment where he is not exercising this ability is understood as a character deficit rather than a physical one. He is refusing to be able-bodied, therefore rejecting full masculinity. Ben, on the other hand, is choosing both masculinity and ability, and is positioned as our protagonist.

Fulfillment of illusions

A small moment in the book that is magnified in the film is a conversation between the men in a food court. In the book, Ben and Trevor sit side by side, watching girls that neither one of them will ever talk to and Ben asks Trevor “what he’d do if he awoke one morning with all of his muscle functions.” Trevor’s answer is: “Take a piss standing up” (Evison, 2015, p. 10). The moment then passes and is never mentioned again. In the film, however, this moment is structured as the Act 1 set up for the movie’s eventual climax and is a significant affirmation of the preferable states of both normative masculinity and able-bodiedness. Ben sets up Trevor’s ventilator before bedtime with the dialogue:

Ben: Can I ask you a question?

Trevor: What?

Ben: If you woke up and you were totally... fine... what's the thing you'd wanna do most?

Trevor: If I could do anything at all? I'd really like to take a pee standing up.

Ben: Yeah, it's pretty awesome. (Burnett, 2016)

The difference between the settings in each of these scenes – in the book the two men are positioned as mates together against the world, and in the film there is visible hierarchy between the standing caregiver and the laying care-receiver – and framing a hypothetical alternate reality where Trevor has “all of his muscle functions” versus one where he is “totally... fine” again reveals the filmmaker’s opinion that Trevor’s current condition is not “fine.” As Norden explains,

The culture asking such questions assumes in advance that we all agree: able-bodied identities, able-bodied perspectives are preferable and what we all, collectively, are aiming for. A system of compulsory able-bodiedness repeatedly demands that people with disabilities embody for others an affirmative answer to the unspoken question, “Yes, but in the end, wouldn't you rather be more like me? (Norden, 1994, p. 9)

This is a subtle but significant signal to the audience that we are aligned with Ben’s able-bodied perspective and Trevor is the Other who would rather be like Us. The payoff to this narrative set-up is the emotional climax of the film, set at the farthest destination on their road trip, in the parking lot of the world’s largest pit in Salt Lake, Utah. Trevor and Ben argue about who is helping whom and where personal/professional boundaries have been crossed. Ben then helps to deliver a baby’s early arrival: a healing counterpoint to his involvement in the accidental death of his own child. Trevor and

Dot kiss for the first time before she leaves to join her father on the road, affirming Trevor's lovability by the female sex. Trevor and Ben are both emotional and elated, and Ben has a flash of inspiration. He borrows a spine board stretcher from the paramedics who responded to the labour call, straps Trevor in, and stands him, vertically erect against the guard rails of the Bingham Canyon Pit. For the first time we see that the men are of equal height and body type (which would not be the case if Trevor was played by an actor with DMD), and even though Trevor is strapped to a board to achieve this standing posture, the camera's frame signals a heroic possibility. Ben unzips Trevor's pants and they both yell euphorically as a stream of urine flows from Trevor's body into the world's biggest man-made crater. The suggestion of sexual conquest is hard to miss. Music swells and the camera circles them majestically to underscore this triumphant performance of able-bodied masculinity and the fulfillment of Trevor's fantasy. For a moment, Trevor is "one of us." This moment does not appear in the novel; the filmmaker has imposed his ableist preferences on the story.

In adapting *The Revised Fundamentals of Caring* for the screen, Burnett has taken on a challenging task: myriad choices about what aspects of a complex, internalized, meandering literary story will best translate to a visual medium where every detail bears calculated weight. The screenwriter needs to discard some storylines and entire characters and amplify others, and to craft a recognizable narrative arc befitting the format of a 90-minute movie. Burnett has succeeded in establishing tension and desire early in the film that are fulfilled by the end, and he weaves personal and relational conflict among the characters that propels our loyalty until the conclusion. However, he has also imposed an ableist perspective on Trevor's character that is nowhere in the book. This lens carries forward a way of understanding people who live with disability that does both them and able-bodied audiences a disservice. He has rewritten, from an uninformed experience, who Trevor is and what his capacity is for full human expression. Screen-Trevor yearns for male experiences that his disability prohibits (confidence in his desirability; respiration without medical intervention; standing urination), Ben orchestrates experiences that simulate male experiences (standing urination, interaction with a woman), and the poignancy of the story is that we know Trevor will never live up to society's standards for able-bodied masculinity. Because of this, we venerate Ben's selflessness in enabling for Trevor a taste of what "normal" men understand. Ben's options, and the journey of his own emotional rehabilitation within the film, separate him from Trevor's world. Able-bodied Ben will move on, further into heterosexual manhood; disabled Trevor will not.

2.2 Deadpool: Science fiction's affirmation of heterosexual able-bodiedness

The IMDb logline for *Deadpool* reads, “A fast-talking mercenary with a morbid sense of humor is subjected to a rogue experiment that leaves him with accelerated healing powers and a quest for revenge” (IMDb, n.d.). The film is part of the successful X-Men series and was released in 2016 by 20th Century Fox (Miller, 2016). Norden catalogues many science fiction films within the disability repertoire for their use of technological intervention to enhance or complement the deformed human body. We don't often think of films like the popular *Star Wars* as disability films because the world of futuristic technology creates its own rules about how the human body functions in time and space; for example, a severed limb is easily replaced by a prosthesis that allows a fighter to continue on his intergalactic battle alongside both human and non-human allies and enemies. However, the place of these representations in the landscape of disability narratives deserves consideration:

These films [Star Wars] and certain others that followed are throwbacks of sorts to an age when curable disabilities were the norm, with several important differences; the replacement of divine intervention with technological achievement – an unseating that generally paralleled the relationship of religion and science during the twentieth century – and the fact that both villains and heroes could benefit from that replacement. (Norden, 1994, p. 295)

Deadpool contains an interesting assortment of disability tropes. In fact, the primary plot is driven by a disability stereotype that affirms able-bodied normativity: the mercenary protagonist, Wade Wilson (Ryan Reynolds), doesn't believe that his fiancée Vanessa (Morena Baccarin), could love him in a disfigured body. After proposing to Vanessa and then discovering that he is ill, Wade disappears from her life rather than subject her to his deterioration from cancer (better-off-dead storyline); he trades his illness for super-human healing abilities to become Deadpool (techno marvel archetype); and then he hunts down the evil scientist who caused Wade's full-body scarring during the mutation process in order to exact revenge (obsessive avenger archetype). *Deadpool* warrants its own detailed case study; there are subversive and overt commitments to conformity in many clever layers. However, I want to pay attention to one moment in particular that demonstrates McRuer's crip/queer theory and bears magnification. As both Wade and Deadpool, the protagonist persistently affirms his heterosexual status with an ongoing stream of sexual double-entendres ranging from threatening to jovial depending on the circumstances of a scene. There seems to be no boundary that his commentary won't cross. (“I've never said this, but don't swallow.”) By joking about sexual engagement with other men he affirms his distance from sexual engagement with other men, and the result is a clear message about which team he plays for. In McRuer's language, Wade/Deadpool

“comes out as straight” through a declared opposition to queerness. Deadpool’s sexual suggestions and clever wordplay drive the pace of the film and the edgy tone of the humour. This makes the following scene particularly interesting.

Vanessa is Wade’s equal in every sense. As he says to her, “Your crazy matches my crazy. We’re like two jigsaw pieces... weird curvy edges... but fit us together, you can see the picture on top” (Reese & Wernick p. 30). Vanessa is equally witty, equally sexual, and equally kinky, which forms the foundation of their relationship. The film’s getting-to-know-you montage is a wink to the romantic comedy convention where we see the new couple spending time together in ways that develop history and intimacy between them. For Wade and Vanessa the montage features a series of holiday-themed sex sessions under the bubbly song “Calendar Girl” by Neil Sedaka. Their sex is hot, kinky and funny. They appreciate each other’s fit bodies and broad appetites, with one exception. In the screenplay, there is a moment in the montage that reads:

Wade is now on hands and knees. His expression betrays great stress. Vanessa leans into frame from behind.

Vanessa: Relax... Happy International Women’s Day...

Wade girds himself, then lets out a surprised, whimpery yelp as some pioneering object journeys into his virgin lands. (Rhett & Wernick, 2015, p. 30)

We are to understand that these lovers alternate between performing dominant and submissive roles with each other (in the previous scene Wade is behind Vanessa), and they are each delighted at finally finding a partner who will explore their furthest sexual boundaries. The script indicates that Vanessa penetrates Wade from behind with a strap-on dildo. In the finished film, however, Vanessa delivers the line “Relax... Happy International Women’s Day...”, Wade girds himself, and then utters “No, nope, nope” and moves away from where Vanessa stands behind him. He refuses her penetration. In the context of the screenplay’s entire montage, this moment doesn’t stand out from any other holiday-themed sex game in the sequence. However, in acting out the performance, this becomes the only moment in their sex play that Wade declines. Something must have occurred during filming for either the actor or the director (Tim Miller) to deviate from the screenwriter’s intention for this moment. Is Wade’s “nope” a response to the potential physical discomfort of anal penetration? We have already seen him engage in physically dangerous circumstances with the targets that he is paid to intimidate, and seen him participate in recreational violence in the bar where his comrades drink and socialize. In the scenes to come we see him withstand inhuman degrees of physical pain as he attempts to morph into a mutant and avoid the fate of cancer. The moment of sexual refusal instead reads as an emotional fear of crossing into territory that his identity can’t sustain. The “nope” is a

comment that his able-bodied masculinity can withstand anything except the performance of an act that he perceives as homosexual, even in play with a woman. This small moment defines the boundaries of his sexuality firmly within an able-bodied, heterosexual spectrum – and it happens to be the last scene in the film where he possesses this identity. He strives to return to this normative state for the remainder of the movie.

Within minutes of this rejection of anal penetration, we montage forward from spring to winter, and Wade presents Vanessa with an engagement ring – a heteronormative conclusion to their year of falling in love. The humour occurs when Vanessa asks where he was hiding the ring, and we see a shot from behind Wade to reveal that he is without pants. His bare ass suggests the storage space – that same space that was off-limits to Vanessa’s strap-on dildo just moments ago. They cuddle to celebrate their engagement, make wise cracks to affirm their compatibility, and Wade photographs them wearing matching ugly Christmas sweaters (their physical beauty is enough to overcome the ugliness of the clothing) with the comment, “perfect.” He gets up from the bed, turns toward the camera and takes his ugly sweater off for a full-frame view of his muscular body just before he faints and collapses to the floor. The beautiful couple’s traditional happiness is interrupted by a cancer diagnosis, which begins Wade’s transformation into the mutant Deadpool. This concludes Act 1, which is the turning point in a story where we now have enough information about the protagonist to justify the journey they embark on. In this case, Wade will leave Vanessa because he doesn’t believe she can love him in an imperfect body. He believes that his identity as Wade, and his relationship with Vanessa’s perfection are “better off dead”.

2.3 Jane the Virgin: Disability oversight

The television series *Jane the Virgin* debuted on The CW Television Network in 2014 and ran until its final season in 2019; it is also currently available on Netflix. The series is widely acclaimed as ground-breaking for centering the stories of Latina women, who are most often cast as highly sexualized supporting characters to White storylines. As a reviewer in *The Atlantic* notes, “At a time when getting people of color into more colorblind roles is widely viewed as the end goal for diversity on TV, the show stands out by going in the opposite direction—by fully drawing on the complexity of its characters’ Latino culture” (Martinez, 2015). *Jane the Virgin* embeds and normalizes discussions about immigration and citizenship, religion, and class within the relationship dramas that propel the series. It also explores sexuality in all manner of complexity: from abstinence and its ties to religion, to promiscuity, queerness and bisexuality, power, masturbation, the sexuality of senior citizens, and consent. Within this culturally progressive landscape, however, disability is an interesting oversight.

The premise of this popular and awarded telenovela is that Jane (Gina Rodriguez), a virgin, is impregnated accidentally by artificial insemination with the sperm of hotel heir, Rafael (Justin Baldoni) who is about to divorce his wife, Petra (Yael Grobglas). The most prominent character with a disability is Magda, played by able-bodied actor Priscilla Barnes. Magda is Petra's mother. She fulfills the role of evil mother-in-law and in the series' first season possesses two visible disabilities: she uses a wheelchair for mobility and has severe facial scars. Magda is dependent on Petra for financial survival. She is demanding, manipulative and violent in her schemes, and provokes increasingly devious and illegal behaviour within Petra's more prominent storyline of obtaining a large sum of money when she divorces Rafael. Magda's broadly wicked persona fits the stereotype that Norden calls the Disabled Villain, where "deformity of the body is a sure sign of deformity of the soul" (Norden, 1994, p. 32). Magda's facial scars were earned when Petra's former lover exacted his revenge for her infidelity by throwing acid that was intended to hit Petra but instead landed on Magda's face. The accident caused Magda's sour demeanour, and much of her villainous behaviour is fuelled by her desire for revenge. For this we can also categorize her as an Obsessive Avenger, "an egomaniacal sort, almost always an adult male, who does not rest until he has had his revenge on those he holds responsible for his disablement and/or violating his moral code in some other way" (Norden, 1994, p. 52). Magda's female gender makes her a contemporary progression of this stereotype. We learn that Magda can, in fact, walk when she needs to or when no one is looking, which includes her in the oldest disability stereotype, the Fake Beggar. This character "fakes a disability to prey on the sympathy of able-bodied citizens who will take pity and give money or charity" (Norden, 1994, p. 14). The Fake Beggar was born at the dawn of cinema and established the tradition of able-bodied actors playing disabled characters in order to achieve the comedic sight gag of a crippled beggar rising to run when police appeared. This trope planted suspicion in audiences' minds that people who appeared to be disabled might just be playing for sympathy, and undermined the severe challenges of people with disabilities living in the real world. Shortly after her mobility is revealed, Magda picks up a detonated grenade and loses a hand and an eye. She trades her fake immobility for permanent disfigurement with no chance of recovery this time, as if the show's creators insist that such an evil soul cannot inhabit a functional body. This episode takes place on a boat, complete with a gratuitous pirate reference (often the landscape of evil and vengeful characters with disabilities) where Magda now wears an eye-patch and eats with a hook that replaces her missing hand. Over a frozen screen of her face, a slugline reads: "Milestones: Hands lost: 1, Eyes lost: 1, Personality unchanged: worse." When Petra cheerfully suggests that they do something fun for Thanksgiving, Magda growls "What I have to be grateful for? My hook?" (Mayron, 2015). On top of all of these problematic character choices, I am particularly interested in the absence of sexuality in Magda's characterization. Over six seasons of a series where almost every other character, no matter

how fleeting their appearance, shows some signs of sexuality that meets the Annenburg definition, Magda does not. Her vanity is presented on screen: she brushes her long blond hair, cares for her skin and nails, and she wears bright, flattering clothing and jewelry. But her appearance is never put to use in attracting sexual attention nor as an expression of her own sexual desire. There seems to be a boundary around her that erases the possibility of a disfigured body possessing sexual appetite or appeal. *Jane the Virgin* meets criticism for its treatment of disability in other characters, too.

On critically acclaimed shows like CW's *Jane The Virgin*, the idea of disability and paraplegia is met with shock and borderline horror. When Michael (Brett Dier) was shot by a crime lord, his family and loved ones were informed the surgery may have paralyzed him. The minute the words left the doctor's mouth, the atmosphere on the show shifted. The family's concern wasn't that Michael would have to adjust to life as a full-time wheelchair user, or how best to help him, but that even the possibility of disability was too much to handle. (Brown, 2017)

Jane the Virgin is inspired by and pays homage to the Latin telenovela, a serialized, socially aware, cultural touchstone for many South American audiences. This North-Americanized version pushes beyond many of the format's parameters with deep questions about women's strength, independence, and choices of the mind and the heart (Martinez, 2015). The show's most valuable contribution is to complicate cultural narratives about people who occupy non-white bodies and to humanize the "other" that North American media has diligently kept exotic and misunderstood. Given this progressive contribution, and rewarded with wide audience loyalty and critical praise, the show's limitations regarding embodied difference in the form of disability are a striking shortcoming.

2.4 Cinematic aesthetics of deafness

Switched at Birth

Another series heralded for its successful social work is the teen drama *Switched at Birth*, originally broadcast on ABC Family network from 2011-2017 and now enjoying prolonged life on Netflix. As one reviewer writes,

Switched at Birth is also the most nuanced and complex depiction of deaf culture and individuals ever to air on television. It's all the more astounding that what unfolds before us—intelligent, emotionally resonant, and even profound—is packaged in what is nominally a teen drama. (Lacob, 2013)

The story follows two young women, Daphne Vasquez (Katie Leclerc) and Bay Kennish (Vanessa Marano), who discover they were switched at birth in the hospital's natal care unit. When they meet

as 18-year-olds, Daphne is deaf and has an established social and academic life within a deaf community. She lives with her single, hearing mother and they communicate comfortably using American Sign Language (ASL) and lip reading. Bay's hearing family is comparatively wealthier, and struggles to learn about deafness and classism, both among the themes that run throughout the entire series. This family drama features multiple deaf and hard-of-hearing characters, most of whom are played by deaf actors, and has been called "one of the most disability friendly shows on television" (Kopić & Woodburn, 2016). Its mainstream success, long run on television, centering of diversely-abled characters, and inclusion of diversely-abled talent mark a turning point for screen-based fiction. Daphne, Bay, and their friends and family members all enjoy flirtations, romances and sexual encounters with no delineation between hearing and deaf, or parents and teens, regarding which characters enter sexual territory. Within this fictional reality, the stigma of asexualizing or desexualizing characters with diverse abilities has truly been overcome. Perhaps this show was allowed to attain mainstream success because the actors are all conventionally attractive. Deafness is not perceivable until the deaf person begins to sign or speak, and so at first glance these characters pose no threat to a mainstream audience's expectations of how fit, stylish or agile a person should be who is allowed to appear on network television. Daphne plays basketball. Her deaf friend Emmet (Sean Berdy) rides a motorcycle and drums in a band. Deaf people date and disagree with each other. These representations of normal teenaged life make the deaf characters relatable and admirable, and close the perceived gap between the activities and aspirations of able-bodied characters and those with embodied differences. Upon this comfortable platform, the show can delve into storylines about the discrimination faced by the deaf community and still retain audience loyalty because the discriminations are complicated, sometimes have unclear accountability, and are often aligned with parallel discriminations based on race or class. There are episodes about class where "deaf students discover that they are not the sole victims of district budget cuts and lack of funding" and where "an aspiring Deaf premedical student finds encouragement in a Black physician" when facing institutional discrimination (Asif, 2018). In this way, the show is a safe bridge between traditional family programming that often depicts beautiful people learning about social injustices – where young adult audiences often seek role models – and the normalization of embodied difference. The difference is mitigated.

Along with successfully integrating disability and sexuality for a mainstream audience, *Switched at Birth* is useful in examining how cinematic technology can immerse hearing audiences in the deaf characters' world through sound design, as described by television critic Emily Nussbaum:

But perhaps most striking is the show's approach to the aesthetics of deafness.

Conversations among deaf characters are silent, with signing and subtitles. While

series like “The West Wing” and “The L Word,” which also included deaf actors (well, Marlee Matlin), contrived ways to have hearing characters translate each scene, in “Switched at Birth” there is often no one to do the translation. Some characters refuse to speak; hearing characters are often bad at signing. During signed dialogue we hear nothing but a trickling fountain in the background, or the sounds of distant crowds. The result is a show that can’t be skimmed: in extended scenes among deaf characters, whole minutes elapse, submerging the audience in a world that feels intimate and alive, rich with grimaces, grins, and other physical nuances we’d usually ignore. (Nussbaum E. , 2012)

These silent scenes trust a hearing audience to pay attention to the intelligence and beauty of another culture being expressed, and to pick up enough nuance that the full narrative is understood. Subtitles clarify the words; the actors’ embodied performances give significance to the text. In these scenes a hearing audience still perceives the ambient sounds of the scene’s environment, including any verbalization that the deaf actors make with their physical expression, and they can read subtitles; a deaf audience will understand the characters’ ASL. Each episode contains at least one of these scenes, sometimes more depending on the featured storylines.

An episode titled “Uprising” caught many critics’ attention for its ground-breaking decision to enact nearly the entire episode in ASL. In “Uprising” the students of the fictional Carlton School for the Deaf protest the school board’s decision to close their high school due to funding cuts. They lock themselves inside the administration offices and issue a list of demands. The episode includes references to the 1988 Deaf President Now protest at Gallaudet, the world’s first higher educational institution for the deaf and hard of hearing, where students successfully demanded that the school’s new president be a deaf person. “Uprising” begins with a verbal scene that lasts for one minute. In the next scene, a group of deaf students and their instructor Melody (Marlee Matlin) discuss their anger at the school board’s threat, and their fears about being mainstreamed into the hearing school system. Melody’s line, “Unless hearing people walk a day in our shoes they will never understand. Never” prefaces the next 48 minutes of ASL without verbal dialogue. The last 50 seconds of the episode reintroduce verbal speech. The invitation for hearing people to walk a day in the shoes of a deaf person is a generous proposition in the interest of developing compassion that fosters understanding between cultures. This fictional day is compressed into a 50-minute television episode. “Uprising” occurs in the middle of season two, when the show is well known to loyal viewers who are presumably invested in continued learning about the series’ various characters. Within this context, the filmmaker’s use of non-diegetic music throughout the entire episode feels like backpedaling from Melody’s invitation. When an audience hears a musical score, some part of the

conscious brain acknowledges that we are being manipulated. Music can “channel an emotion that has already been created out of the fabric of the story” but more often than not, it directs us on how to feel about what we’re watching (Ondaatje, 2002). In a sense, it demonstrates a lack of trust that the deaf world of the story is enough to engage us fully in what is unfolding. Music whose source is outside the world of the characters is intended solely for the viewing/hearing audience. It is a filmmaker’s direct aural communication to the viewer, bypassing the characters. In this case, it excludes the deaf characters within the story who don’t perceive music as a hearing audience does, and it undermines their desire to have us experience their silent reality in order to align with their urgent desire to protect a safe space. For the students who attend Carlton School for the Deaf, this institution is one of the only entirely supportive communities in the world. The episode educates us about the history of deaf culture and brings attention to how much discrimination these students have and would again face when they are positioned as freaks among a majority of hearing peers. It is disappointing that the creators didn’t trust their audience to stay with these characters on the full emotional journey, that they failed in their ambition to invite us into the shoes of the deaf community.

The Little Death

A year after “Uprising” first aired in 2013, an Australian feature film called *The Little Death* was released that contains a storyline between deaf characters and makes interesting choices regarding sound design. *The Little Death* interweaves five heterosexual couples who are all negotiating their sex lives with each other, and are connected geographically as neighbours. The stories feature themes including sexual masochism (sexual gratification from humiliation, pain and suffering), role play fetishism (sexual arousal from pretending to be someone else), dacryphilia (arousal from seeing someone cry), somnophilia (sexual arousal from watching someone sleep), and telephone scatologia (sexual arousal from making obscene phone calls to strangers) (Lawson, 2014). It’s this last scenario that introduces us to Monica (Erin James) and Sam (TJ Power). Monica works as an ASL interpreter at Video Relay and Sam calls in asking for her to interpret a call to a phone sex hotline. The misunderstandings, gumption and commitment to the task all make for endearing hilarity, cutting back and forth between Sam in his apartment, Monica in her place of work, and the sex worker (Genevieve Hegney) in her apartment where she feeds her aging grandmother between graphic narration of imagined sexual scenarios. By the end of the 15-minute segment, we know that Sam and Monica are destined to meet again, in person, and will probably stay together through time. This couple’s story is not differentiated in any way from the film’s other couples and their sex lives, making them social and sexual equals to their fictional peers.

The audio design in Monica and Sam's segment of *The Little Death* follows the reality of each character. Monica wears a hearing aid that sometimes acts up. When she removes it to fiddle with the dials the soundscape goes silent and then revives when she puts the device back in her ear. Monica speaks clearly when addressing hearing characters like the sex worker, and signs fluently when addressing deaf characters like her translation clients. Monica is our protagonist in this narrative: we meet her first and the camera favours her perspective of Sam more than his perspective of her. The audio design tells us we are in her world where her electronic device permits hearing unless it doesn't. Frames in Sam's apartment are mostly silent because he doesn't verbalize, but we do hear his breath, body movements and environmental sounds like the pencil on paper as he sketches Monica's portrait. Non-diegetic music only enters the scene when their conversation is on pause while Sam looks intently at Monica as he draws her. The music weaves around their ASL dialogue as it would in a verbal speaking scene. The filmmaker respects the characters' discussion by allowing their bodies to talk to each other without the interruption of emotional direction to the audience through music, even though it causes an unusually long passage of "silent" film. There are no subtitles imposed on this scene; the viewer is left to understand what they will in the dynamic interaction between these people. Of course, the Netflix subtitles can be turned on to read all dialogue, even the spoken lines, but the filmmaker doesn't assume we need this to appreciate the story. The result is a well-crafted experience of the silences and sounds between two people who connect because of their hearing impairments, but are defined by their vitality and desire for emotional and sexual connection.

Master of None: New York, I Love You

Another show that made headlines by inviting hearing audiences into a deaf person's reality is the critically acclaimed series *Master of None* from American comic and social critic, Aziz Ansari. The episode titled *New York, I Love You*, released on Netflix in 2017, is another sequence of interwoven vignettes, often addressing sex and dating, with one couple who argues about the importance of cunnilingus in their bedroom. Maya (Treshelle Edmond) and her husband Barry (Stanley Bahorek) sign expressively in the middle of a gift shop, safe in the assumption that no one can understand their explicit descriptions of what she wants and what he would rather discuss at home (Ansari, Yang, & Jefferson, 2017). The scenes that feature Maya are absolutely silent, including the absence of environmental noise. Maya's reality is portrayed through the use of subtitles when she communicates in ASL with other ASL characters, and the absence of subtitles when she interacts with a verbal character and can't "hear" what they say. In this way, we gain a sense of how disconnected she is from the verbal environment around her. When we meet Maya at her retail job and she gently rejects a customer who flirts with spoken jokes, we hear nothing and there are no subtitles. He doesn't know ASL, therefore she can't understand him, and we can't read him. When

she meets a friend for coffee and they both use ASL, suddenly there are subtitles: communication. The text, which allows us to receive as much information as Maya receives, continues in the scene with her husband as they walk through the world, speaking fluently with ASL, even if their desires are disconnected. A verbal security guard approaches to remind her to pay for the scarf she tried on and the subtitles disappear. Her ASL husband returns to ask what happened and the subtitles reappear. This choice to use the combination of audio silence and text or no text cleverly achieves a glimpse of what Marlee Matlin's character proposed in *Switched at Birth* – to have hearing people walk a day in the shoes of a deaf person. The theme of this experience is whether or not we are understood, and the insight is the degree of disconnection experienced by the deaf and hard of hearing in a predominantly verbal landscape. The immersion in silence, reliance on only visual cues, and shock of sound when it returns for the next vignette, clarify a sound-less experience through cinematic techniques.

2.5 Margarita With a Straw: Protagonism generates empathy

Margarita with a Straw is a feature film, written and directed by Indian filmmaker, Shonali Bose, about Laila (Kalki Koechlin), a 19-year-old woman who leaves her home in India to study music in New York. Laila has cerebral palsy (CP) and uses a wheelchair for mobility. For viewers not accustomed to seeing the physicality of CP, watching Laila's condition on screen takes some adjustment. However, the filmmaker's hand is gentle and unflinching, and she makes it easy to love and empathize with Laila as the story unfolds. Laila's sphere includes her parents and brother, friends, an unrequited crush, a make-out friend, and lovers in both male and female bodies; this character's sexuality is fully realized, and her experiences are comparable to those of any young woman who leaves home to find her wings. In an interview with *Cultural Weekly*, Bose talks about her cousin, writer Malini Chib, who is the inspiration for *Margarita With a Straw*, and her personal experience of a life lived with cerebral palsy:

Malini was born with acute Cerebral Palsy. I was one when she was born. I can't identify a moment of consciousness about it, as such, because we grew up in a joint family, doing everything together. It was such a natural thing for me. Anywhere that we went, it would take longer. We would both be learning the same things at the same time. I remember taking swimming lessons together. The family made sure that there were no differences in how we were treated. We went out of our way to make sure that Malini had everything that I had.

My aunt by necessity formed the first school for children with Cerebral Palsy in India because there weren't any here. Malini was one of the first persons with

Cerebral Palsy to go to college in India; I was one of her writers. When we were teenagers, I would take her out dancing. People would stare, but we would still do all of that. Cerebral Palsy is just something that I grew up with and have been very engaged with my whole life. (Stein, 2016)

Bose's understanding of Chib's abilities and the full complexity of her humanity clearly informs *Margarita With a Straw*. She delivers a protagonist with desire, curiosity, opinion, a social network and unpredictable responses to the world around her. The first human movement that we see on screen is a close frame on hands pouring a bright green smoothie into a red sunlit travel mug, affixing the top and then adding a drinking straw. Colour and care. Or colour and accommodation. In either interpretation there is love and beauty in the simple action; and an aesthetic of sensuality. The hands belong to Laila's mother, whom Laila calls Mai (Revathy). The drinking straw is an instrument of access for Laila and becomes a symbol of both her independence and her interdependence in the world. She carries a straw in her school bag and asks for one in restaurants and bars, which allows her to participate in the pleasures of the world with a signature flair.

Laila is a sensualist: she relishes touching her lover's skin, bubble baths, the feel of her mother's hands washing her hair, and she lays her head on her mother's shoulder when Mai sings. Simultaneously, the film doesn't gloss over the discomforts of navigating the world from a wheelchair. When the school elevator breaks down, four workmen argue and puff as they carry Laila and her chair up a flight of stairs. When her band wins a music competition specifically because the judges learn that the lyricist is a "disabled girl", Laila flips off the announcer and wheels off stage – to roaring cheers from the youthful audience. When Laila and her mother travel to New York where she is accepted to a creative writing program at NYU, Laila's wheels get stuck in the snow of an unplowed city sidewalk. In all of this, we remain in Laila's frame; we experience how it feels to receive these ambiguities and discriminations. A less intentional filmmaker might choose at some point to include a wide shot of Laila in the world surrounded by able-bodied characters: an objective statement that signals her otherness relative to the "normal" world. But Bose keeps us within the emotional and physical range of Laila's protagonism; the audience always relates to her.

Filmmaker Jill Soloway talks about how "protagonism is propaganda that protects and perpetuates privilege" (and jokes about the plethora of Ps in that statement). The protagonist whose life is presented on screen has the privilege of an audience's awareness, understanding and compassion (Soloway, *The Female Gaze* - TIFF: Master Class, 2016). Studies like *Prominent Messages in Television Drama "Switched at Birth" Promote Attitude Change Toward Deafness* (An, Paine, McNeil 2014) report that even brief exposure to characters with physical diversity, through screen-based media, results in positive attitude changes toward similar individuals in the real world. Soloway references

Roger Ebert's opinion that "*film is an empathy machine*, and this is true of television, and all story" (Soloway, *The Female Gaze* - TIFF: Master Class, 2016). *Margarita With a Straw* achieves the protagonism of a woman with CP by placing the camera at Laila's eye level, moving at the pace of her mobility, and joining her life at a moment of creative and emotional transformation rather than at a moment defined by her CP. The film immerses us in Laila's world, which includes CP, and assumes a viewership inclusive of diversely-abled bodies. Laila's condition is never explained to an uninformed character who stands in for an audience's ignorance. She simply *is*, and we learn about her through her explorations as we do when able-bodied characters are presented for able-bodied audiences. No explanation necessary.

A character's full sexual self

Bose was confronted with the complexity of her cousin's sexuality during a moment in adulthood when Chib expressed the frustration of her unfulfilled desires.

I was forty, and she was thirty-nine. "What do you want for your fortieth birthday, Malini? It's the best birthday ever!" It came up loud and clear. "I JUST WANT TO HAVE SEX!" Not I want to have sex by the time I'm forty, but "I just want to have sex." Then, literally my line, "Oh, it's not as good as it's made out to be." I didn't know what to say. Then I added, "You know, we'll get you a vibrator." Later, I was thinking about it. I was thrown.

I was very conscious about her sexuality as a teenager. I did not date anybody when we were in high school together because I didn't want her to be heartbroken — Because Malini was so romantic and constantly thinking everybody is in love with her! If somebody (of the male species) would just look at her kindly, she'd be, "Ahh ... guess what, I think he likes me!" And it would break my heart so much. I shelved thinking about it for many years because maybe I didn't want to deal with it. Or because she was doing amazing in her career. Malini had written a novel by that point. So it shocked me! It shocked me when that sentence came out. (Stein, 2016)

This confrontation was the impetus for Bose to make a film specifically "about the sexuality of the disabled and about the fact that they're looked at as sexless beings" (Bose, Shonali Bose, 2015).

Within the first five minutes of the film, Laila joins Dhruv (Hussain Dalal), a male wheelchair-user, in their college cafeteria where they flirt and laugh with each other. Laila pulls a straw out of her bag so she can share his soda. Dhruv watches a group of girls at another table. He pulls Laila's head to his shoulder so she can share his point of view and teases, "Don't be jealous, I'll only marry you." They giggle as a girl pulls down her shirt to cover a patch of bare lower back. The

camera frames are tight on Laila and Dhruv with shallow focus that convey physical closeness and emotional intimacy. These two wheelchair-users playfully express their attraction for each other, demonstrate confidence that they feel attractive to the other, and do nothing to hide their reliance on their wheelchairs or Laila's need for a straw to help her drink. In this short cafeteria scene, the reality of *Margarita With a Straw* is established: people with physical diversity have desire and are seen as desirable, inclusive of their full selves. The story maintains this tone throughout. Laila masturbates after stumbling upon internet pornography, she applies makeup before school, finds an empty classroom where she and Dhruv can kiss, writes loving song lyrics for a flirtatious band-mate, and fights with Dhruv when he gets jealous. In New York she develops affection for her polyamorous male classmate and goes dancing with a woman who becomes her lover. These are activities that any college-aged woman might engage in.

Diversity as access to sensual engagement

In films with able-bodied protagonism where characters with physical diversity are cast as “other” the disability apparatus or embodied difference often causes distance between diversely-abled and non-diversely-abled characters. For example, in *The Fundamentals of Caring* Trevor's medical apparatus is positioned as “between” Trevor and Ben; any necessary physical contact that crosses the distance is embarrassing and requires the overcompensation of exaggerated professionalism or wisecracks. However, Bose views the physicality of Laila and her cerebral palsy, Dhruv and his wheelchair, and Khanum (Sayani Gupta) and her visual impairment as opportunities for sensual and sexual interactions. This is established at the beginning of the film in the aforementioned scene where Laila and Dhruv flirt and share a soda in their college cafeteria. Her straw and the closeness of their chairs invite physical interactions that morph into flirtation. Laila meets Khanum at a BlackLivesMatter rally in New York. When tear gas scatters a chanting crowd, Laila pulls the visually impaired woman onto her lap and wheels them both to safety. Their first interaction is initiated by Khanum's inability to see which way to run, and the benefit of Laila's motorized chair. Their friendship builds on shared cultural references, student life in New York, and the sensuality of each woman's means of physical orientation. Khanum takes Laila's hand and places it on the detailed surface of a museum artifact, which opens the door for Khanum to “see” Laila by touching her arms and face. Physical restriction blurs into an opportunity for intimate touch. Khanum helps Laila change into her swimsuit in a recreation centre changeroom before they enjoy the sensuality of water together; Laila is awed at seeing Khanum's body so comfortably naked as she pulls on her own swimsuit. They visit a blues club where Khanum encourages Laila to order her first alcoholic drink – a margarita with a straw; Khanum dances indulgently and uses the proximity of Laila's wheelchair to maintain her orientation. All of these pragmatic physicalities pave the path toward physical

engagement for pleasure. The first night that they spend together is full of vulnerability and tenderness; they rely on touch and the sounds of their breathing to negotiate coming together. Bose trusts her actors to hold an audience's attention without emotional prompts from a musical score. As they become lovers and then roommates, Laila serves as Khanum's eyes and Khanum uses her arms where Laila's don't reach. There is no boundary between pleasurable and functional closeness. The new couple's biggest worry isn't related to their physical challenges; rather they are concerned about how Laila's parents will react to learning about her bisexuality if she comes out to them.

In the film's subplot, on her first day at NYU, Laila is offered the support of a classmate who will perform as her writer. She is about to refuse this proposition, explaining that she can type, but catches sight of the blond, blue-eyed volunteer, Jared (William Moseley), and agrees to the arrangement. Laila minimizes her ability in the way that a smart girl might pretend she needs tutoring by the cute boy in class. Her CP gives her access to an attractive man she might not otherwise get to know very well. His friendship is sincere and as they spend time together he opens Laila's mind to his polyamorous orientation. On a rainy afternoon spent studying in Jared's apartment, Laila needs help using the bathroom. Jared lifts her from her chair to the toilet and pulls her underpants down before he leaves the room. Rather than objectify Laila's physical and emotional vulnerability with wide frames in these moments, or mask embarrassment with humour, or underline the tension with music, Bose keeps the camera close on Laila's face and Jared's hands, and leaves the sound design naturalistic. This new level of physical closeness between Laila and Jared leads naturally to lying together on his bed, removing clothes, and making love. The camera tenderly captures skin, faces, and Laila's emotional state as she experiences heterosexual sex for the first time. Bose's intention to make a film "about the sexuality of the disabled" leads her to imagine what is possible rather than what is restricted when characters with embodied differences reach to express their desires. She leverages what others might read as physical limitations instead as the impetus for both emotional and physical sensuality in her characters.

Likely informed by her personal experience of a life lived with cerebral palsy, Bose also writes moments of internalized bias for the characters with disabilities who live in an ableist world. This occurs subtly in a scene where Laila crops a picture of herself for FaceBook. In the stream of FaceBook photos we see that she is comfortable being photographed and her social circle includes many types of diversity. She clips out most, but not all, of her wheelchair. This could be read as an act of minimizing her CP to appear normative but could also be equated to curatorial vanities that many of us perform like hiding a belly or double chin. The bias is more pronounced when, in a moment of jealousy at Laila's affections for her able-bodied band-mate, Dhruv lashes out, "Being friends with normal people won't make you normal." His intention to hurt her calls upon the ableist

idea that her physical condition is less-than the normality of the able-bodied population. Given that Dhruv also occupies a wheelchair, his barb reveals internalized self-devaluation and fear of Laila's abandonment for a man whose body is more capable than his. Later in the film when Khanum asks about Laila's dating experience, Laila's self-effacement sounds like a comment on her CP:

Khanum: Have you ever dated?

Laila: Why would anyone date me?¹

Khanum: Why do you put yourself down all the time? Let me do it for you!

Laila: Because that has been my experience.

Khanum: For the last time... You are very beautiful.

The dynamic between the women is that Khanum enacts confidence in her own attractiveness and draws out Laila's emerging sexuality over the course of their relationship. However, in a scene when Laila confesses to Khanum that she was sexual with Jared, Khanum's first response assumes ableism as the motivation:

Khanum: So by fucking you, Jared gave you a certificate of normalcy?

Laila: No. It happened in the moment.

Khanum: How convenient

Laila: Jared ... could see me. That's why. (Bose, Margarita with a Straw, 2014)

Khanum doesn't ask about gender preference (perhaps Laila wanted to partner with a male body) or about race (Laila and Jared are the only Caucasian characters among the principal cast); her biggest insecurity is her disability. Laila's answer that she wanted to be seen reveals the very human contradictions between personal desires and political acts that many of us harbour. These conversations each occur between two characters with physical diversity in the film. There is never derogatory discussion about physical difference between a character with disability and one without. Perhaps these unique vulnerabilities are safely voiced when shared among people who understand each other's positions in the world. Without a non-disabled person in the room, the members of disability culture can name the fears that bind them and call each other out for perceived betrayal. And they can examine the messiness of internalized bias and support each other in moving through those moments of self-doubt within a dynamic of understanding.

In documentary videos like *The Last Taboo* and Hannah Witton's *Disability, Sex, Relationships and Dating Roundtable*, humans living with physical disability discuss the most vulnerable feeling of being substandard in a world that values a commercialized idea of physical perfection:

This is a really big problem. I've spent my whole life feeling a little bit substandard. When I'm looking to date a guy, if he is able-bodied – I've spoken to therapists about this – where I just think, if you've got a shelf of toys and one's broken and one's fixed and shiny and new, why would you go for the broken one? (Witton, 2018)

Arunima Misra, a stylish lawyer and disability awareness trainer, speaks this on a panel about disability, sex and dating, to other panelists with a variety of visible and invisible disabilities, and receives waves of empathy from her colleagues. They all recognize the thought and have their own stories about learning to move through the pressures of ableist culture. When their commiserations ebb she continues,

It plagues me. It is painful. [...] I'm better now. I don't think about myself in that way because at the end of the day you've got to back yourself and we should be our own biggest fan. But it's hard, it's really hard. (Witton, 2018)

Seeing this discussion on screen between friends who share a sense of otherness – in fiction and non-fiction media – lends texture to the representation of a life lived with embodied differences. Sexuality is always complicated. Sexuality discussed on screen presents opportunity to witness our most human vulnerabilities. Nothing is more vulnerable than admitting a feeling of weakness, and then asking for support to keep believing we are worthy.

Gender and diverse ability

Along with the highs and lows of sex and disability, Bose references the intersection of gender and ability in the storyline of Laila's mother, who undergoes treatment for colon cancer. Before she has disclosed her illness to Laila, and before Laila has disclosed her bisexuality, Mai and Laila sit on a porch and make each other laugh with complaints that no matter how educated Indian men are, they still want women to be their maids. Their jokes hint at Mai's concern for how her son and husband will survive after she is gone, and also subversively affirm Laila's bilateral involvement with a woman. Bose is aware of the many threads in each of these dynamics.

[...] people just want the perfect bodies. Women face that. When I started doing research, I found that there are quite a few males with disabilities who end up being able to marry or have relationships – more so than females with disabilities. Women not only need to have the perfect female body, but also a female is looked upon as the nurturer. If you are disabled, and you need to be taken care of, you aren't that capable of doing all the housework. So this gender role also becomes a problem. (Stein, 2016)

The expectation that women perform as caretakers in a marriage, even when they live with physical restrictions is echoed in the documentary film *Shameless: The ART of Disability* made by west-coast filmmaker Bonnie Sherr Klein in 2006. Klein experienced a stroke in her mid-forties and this film documents her renewed commitment to making art, now as a person living with impaired mobility. In a scene where Klein and her husband Michael sit in their kitchen looking through photos of their life together, Michael quotes that men whose wives have had strokes leave their marriages about 80% of the time. He jokes, “Why didn’t I leave? Oh, poverty of imagination, I suppose.” This provokes extended laughter from both of them. He then gets serious and says, “No, I didn’t leave because our relationship basically didn’t change. I mean that’s the major issue – that Bonnie takes care of me. And she took care of me when she was in the ICU and quadriplegic. She was taking care of Seth and me and Naomi” (Klein, 2006). His comment indicates that as wife to a physician, and mother to two teenaged children, Bonnie was not afforded the selfishness that a health crisis and a fundamental identity redesign deserve. She was responsible for caring for her family’s needs alongside negotiating her own critical wellbeing, and this is the gendered foundation upon which her marriage remained intact.

Queer gender expression embodied in the same character as one with physical disability is microscopically rare in the top-grossing US feature films studied by the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative Research Team. In 2014, the year that *Margarita With a Straw* was released, the *Inequality in 700 Popular Films* study didn’t even include disability in its findings. The study of 100 top-grossing films released in 2015 identified:

- Only 2.4% of all speaking or named characters were shown with a disability.
- Only 19% of characters with a disability were female and 81% were male. This is a new low for gender inequality in film. Not one LGBT character with a disability was portrayed across the 100 top films of 2015. (Smith, Choueiti, & Pieper, *Inequality in 800 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBT, and Disability from 2007-2015*, 2016)

Margarita With a Straw is an Indian film, and earned modest box office receipts compared to the films that Annenberg reviews. Even so, their reports over time suggest that Laila and Khanum represent a dramatic minority of who is shown in the cinema. The 2018 report indicates:

- Only 2.5% of all characters were depicted with a disability across the 100 most popular movies of 2017.

- A total of 78 movies did not include one female character with a disability.
- 14 movies featured a lead or co lead character with a disability at any point in the film. The majority of films with lead or co lead characters with a disability featured males and few females. Only 1 film revolved around an underrepresented leading character with a disability and 1 a leading character from the LGBT community. (Smith S. L., Choueiti, Pieper, Chase, & el Choi, 2018)

As rare as the intersection of LGBT and Crip is in Hollywood, there are increasingly numerous documentaries, online videos, and independent films made by people with disabilities who identify as other than cisgender heterosexual. In *The Last Taboo*, artist Mazique Bianco explains that disability can be a jumping off point for non-normative sexual expressions because normative, or commercially prescribed, physical behaviour is already inaccessible:

I think that queer sex, being able to have queer sex, and opening myself up to queer sex and feeling good about it has [...] taught me about how to have sex, both with a different body and with different bodies. Because you already are thinking about new ways that you do things. You're already thinking outside of this normative paradigm of [...] missionary position, like "*this* is how people have sex". (Freeman, 2013)

Laila's sexuality reflects this expansive responsiveness to her own unique desires. She eventually does reveal her bisexuality to Mai in a sequence of scenes that feature misunderstandings and determination to be heard. In response to Mai's snipe that Laila's bisexuality isn't normal, Laila uses her disability to call out her mother's hypocrisy. "That's what the world said about me to you. What's your problem now?" Laila's ability to see across the boundaries that determine "normal" and prioritize her authenticity, opens a space where her otherwise progressive mother is limited. Mai struggles to adjust to her new perception of Laila and Khanum, which invites heartfelt growth for all characters. Perhaps Bose is creating this story from a sense of social justice about representation of marginalized humans, but she is also presenting wonderful, transformative drama on screen. These seldom-explored social dimensions invite fresh, innovative storylines in a media landscape where audiences are oversaturated with predictable narratives.

2.6 Dina: Normativity & complication

While mainstream scripted narratives often restrict audiences from traveling too deep into the intersections of sexuality and disability, non-fiction stories have permission to deliver much more

intricate and dramatic circumstances – as in, “you couldn’t make this stuff up, folks”. *Dina* is an American documentary film released in 2017, made by Antonio Santini and Dan Sickles. The story follows the engagement, wedding and honeymoon of Dina Buno and Scott Levin, who live in Philadelphia. Dina and Scott are both middle-aged and live on the autism spectrum. The drama of the film revolves around the couple’s sexual incompatibility. Dina has relationship experience from a first marriage and a subsequent significant relationship, and she now looks forward to married cohabitation with Scott. Scott is sexually inexperienced and resistant to sexual engagement, although his romantic heart shines through in every scene. The real-life complexity of this couple’s struggles contradicts the cinematic tradition of portraying characters with neurological diversity as either one-dimensionally villainous or innocent. “When I met Dina, she showed us a manuscript for a memoir about her life,” Santini explains in an interview. “We felt that she was bubbling with all this stuff she wanted to express. Her diagnosis came with being denied. She was told that flirting, love, and marriage aren’t for her” (Brabaw, 2018). Her personality on screen proves otherwise. The film uses wide frames that include Dina and Scott’s environment, within which the audience is positioned as a fortuitous eavesdropper on the mundane moments that make up a life. The couple’s familiarity with each other and with their community of neurologically diverse friends and family permits the camera to witness celebration, joy, vulnerability, intelligence, frustration and deep love that is rare on screen, and certainly rare in fictional films where characters with embodied differences appear as tokens in able-bodied hegemonies. The couple’s feelings are complicated. Dina pampers and grooms herself, and gets into bed wearing clothes that show off her curves. She repeatedly asks for Scott to walk by her side, rub her feet, put his arms around her. He acknowledges her requests with “Of course, Honey” but follows up with minimal physical involvement. On an afternoon spent mini-golfing with another couple, Scott stands on the edge of the group within earshot, although his back is turned as if he’s not part of the conversation, while Dina complains to her friends:

It’s very frustrating because I feel like he doesn’t want to be with me, and I feel like maybe he doesn’t like me, like there’s something wrong. And then I said, “you know maybe there’s something wrong.” So you know, I’m just being me. And then I get frustrated because it causes arguments, it makes me feel really insecure. You know, and I’m tired of being rejected. Think about having disabilities and people rejecting you your whole life. And then when I go cuddle with him, he pushes me away. It’s very uncomfortable. (Santini & Sickles, 2017)

In traditional fiction films, rejection of a person with disability is more likely to come from an able-bodied character than from within the disability community. We sense that Scott registers her words, and Dina doesn’t say anything to her friends that she hasn’t said to him directly. Neither of the two

friends add to Dina's criticism or come to Scott's rescue. They simply bear witness to the frustration of the situation with empathetic silence. In the next scene Scott comforts Dina as she cries on the couch and apologizes for being selfish, for having needs when he doesn't seem to crave sexual intimacy. Scott's solution is to play a song for her that expresses how much he loves her. They sing together as she sniffs her tears away. The tangle of Dina's impressive ability to ask for what she wants and articulate how she feels; the ambiguity about whether Scott's hesitations are "an aspy thing" (the couple casually refers to Asperger syndrome), real fears that become clear as the film progresses, an asexual orientation, or a combination of any of these elements; and the skill they each have to empathize with the other while honouring their own boundaries make for a fascinating and stereotype-busting portrayal of sex and disability.

Tension escalates as their wedding approaches. In the car on the way to Scott's bachelor party bowling night, he redirects his friends' teasing about "getting lucky soon" to an account of how romantic the proposal was that he staged for Dina. It included a surprise cake at their favourite restaurant and Scott kneeling with a ring. He then confesses that if he and Dina were to have sex, he's afraid of doing something wrong or being too rough with her. Sometimes she says he hugs her too roughly. His friends empathize with his first-time nerves and comment on their own similar insecurities as real and valid. In the fictional movie, *The 40 Year-Old Virgin*, the simple-minded protagonist is a frustrated buffoon whose colleagues take up the eradication of his virginity as their personal mission. His lack of sexual experience devalues all his hobbies, friendships, career choices and other life experiences. He is staged as un-masculine in the camera's frame and in the overall narrative until he becomes "properly" sexually active with an age-appropriate woman (Apatow, 2005). In the face of Scott's confession about his lack of sexual experience, his bowling buddy simply shares his own understanding about how relationships deepen over time and how he and his wife have developed communication skills. He nods with support as Scott describes his fears about the potential for things to go wrong in the bedroom. The alliance between these men is deep and respectful. Confessions in the car have no bearing on the fun of bowling together to celebrate the upcoming wedding, and Scott's value within his community remains intact. Esther Perel is a couples and family therapist who writes that men's sexual expression is often crippled by performance anxiety, insecurity, and fear of being perceived as predatory by partners that they love. (Perel, *Men, Women, and Sexuality: More Similar Than Different*, 2018) Scott's behaviour fits this description, as does that of Andy in *The 40 Year-Old Virgin*. The difference between these films is the response of each man's male community to his circumstances. The fictional men who perform as able-bodied guardians of heterosexual masculinity respond with ridicule and competition to solve the sexual "problem" of their pitiable colleague. The non-fictional men with neurological diversity and long-

standing friendship respond with patience, compassion and a commitment to honour the journey as it unfolds.

The layers of Scott's concern become clearer during his honeymoon after a romantic night that ends chastely, when Dina is again frustrated at his lack of sexual reciprocity. Rather than accuse him of failing as a husband, she apologizes for having desires, for pushing him beyond his comfort. "You know, I've heard *give Scott a lot of credit because he's trying* but I've done more than try. And I just feel like - everybody else knows that you're cute and sweet and special but I'm not as good as you are." Dina's self-doubt isn't located in her neuroatypicality or her physical appearance, rather in the very female conundrum of having carnal desire that contradicts the socially sanctioned archetype of a selfless, accommodating, pure-minded wife. Scott's usual responses to Dina's complaints involve sincere platitudes of "you're not asking for too much, honey" and "that's something I can work on." However, on this day he reveals a thornier emotional jumble:

"Honey, you're more than special. You've been through more heartbreak than I could ever handle in my lifetime. [...] To go through what you've been through and still be alive in this world is very inspirational. [...] Most people, having gone through what you've gone through, would've possibly perished by now. You haven't, you're still here, inspiring people. (Santini & Sickles, 2017)

This exchange takes place on a picturesque park bench facing the sunset. What follows is the audio recording of the 911 call that Dina's former boyfriend placed after he stabbed her repeatedly in a jealous rage. Scott's reference to what Dina has "been through" is her life-threatening history that haunts them both. In the background of the 911 recording we hear Dina apologize for making her partner mad. Her present concern that her desires are inappropriate and might push Scott beyond his comfort level are the residue of lived trauma that she didn't know if she would survive.

Whether Dina's apologies and attempts to curb her sexual appetite are motivated by notions that women who are neurologically atypical should be chaste, or that women in general are not supposed to express desire, she navigates rough terrain between her yearnings and her husband's reluctance. The film shows no sexual activity beyond kissing and cuddling, and yet the discussions about sexual acts and about emotional involvement are explicit and raw. The majority of characters shown on screen in *Dina* are neurologically diverse. We see them traverse through the broader world and interact with service providers, neighbours and family members; however, those people are positioned as peripheral to the drama of our protagonists and their friends. Dina and Scott's culture becomes familiar as the film unfolds and we understand the logic of their decisions and responses. The film is entirely without judgement or an able-bodied objectivity about the couple's world; it

simply observes. This immersion into a new on-screen perspective enriches our cultural understanding of who humans are that live with neurological diversity, and offers compelling storylines that are scarcely seen on mainstream screens.

2.7 Somebody to Love, A Love Supreme, The Last Taboo: In our own voices

There are documentary films from around the globe on Netflix and Amazon Prime that address disability and sexuality from various angles. *Somebody to Love – Sex and Disability* is an Irish film, released in 2014, that follows people with physical and intellectual disabilities in various scenarios related to romance, dating and love. We meet Sarah and John Paul, a couple who both have cerebral palsy and are raising a vibrant child together. Throughout the pregnancy, they feared the threat of having their daughter taken away from them by health authorities who questioned their suitability as parents. We meet two women who are wheelchair users and play rugby together. Deirdre is engaged to marry Steve, an able-bodied man who adores her openly; Ciara dates men with disabilities and without, and she talks about the challenges and advantages of both situations. We meet a theatre troupe of actors with physical and intellectual diversity who rehearse and stage a play about two people who want to go away for a romantic weekend together. In Ireland, pre-marital sex for people with intellectual disabilities is a criminal act; the play illuminates the outdated inhumanity of this law. *Somebody to Love* does a beautiful job of examining where cultural assumptions about people with embodied differences conflict with the reality of the desires and capabilities of those people to understand and navigate their own worlds (Rodgers, 2017). The camera shows us athletes on wheels, a bridal gown fitting, parents playing in the park with their child, theatre rehearsals and performance, a radio interview, a wedding, several romantic dates, travel and shared meals. The bodies are diverse, but activity is familiar.

A Love Supreme is an Italian film released in 2016 that follows the story of Stefania and Alessandro who live in a group home for people with intellectual disabilities, as they and their community prepare for their wedding day. Italian law prohibits people with intellectual disability from entering into legally binding contracts, including marriage. The couple's caregivers and family are so supportive of their love that they plan a "libertarian and secular ceremony" as a public declaration of community support for their union and as an act of anarchy against the government. This charming film shows how love illuminates lovers of all kinds, along with those around them who recognize the vitality of that love (Cannito, 2016). Visually we see members of a group home preparing and sharing meals together, extended family preparing wedding decorations, Stefania and Alessandro at work in an electronics factory and restaurant respectively, shopping for wedding

clothes, and a trip to the barber. Laughter and teasing, worry and relief, celebration and dancing from the central couple, their house-mates and their extended community are also depicted.

The Last Taboo is an American documentary, released in 2013, that profiles six people with various physical disabilities and one of their able-bodied partners, as they discuss their experiences with relationships and sex. Alex lives with cerebral palsy. He recounts his yearning to explore his sexuality, the journey of learning to feel attractive, and the challenge of finding partners who are patient and playful enough to share those experiences with him. Mazique lives with amyoplasia and talks about how inhabiting a unique body invites creativity with sexual partners. Identifying as queer opens her relationship options to include lovers in all body types. Morgan lives with mild cerebral palsy and her partner Matthew was born with lumbosacral agenesis. They recall their lack of sexual awareness when they first met because the medical industry largely discourages people with disabilities from asking questions about their sexual futures. Lauren lives with arthrogryposis. She and her able-bodied partner Erin talk about relationship boundaries between friends, lovers and caregivers, and how the intimacy inherent in all of those dynamics can lead to pleasurable or invasive interactions. Gary has lower body paralysis and describes having to reimagine himself as sexual after acquiring disability and a wheelchair in his early adulthood. *The Last Taboo* addresses the idea of beauty and the ways in which people who will never meet commercially endorsed ideals of physical acceptability learn to value their own, and their partners', unique physicalities that lead to pleasure, love and self-discovery. The speakers also describe in detail what their bodies can and can't do in sexual situations and the ways in which they have learned to adapt physically, sometimes in ingenious ways that less creative lovers would never be bothered to discover (Freeman, 2013). All of these films employ conventional documentary techniques where seated interviews are intercut with clips of the speakers moving around their neighbourhoods performing familiar tasks. They effectively support the public-awareness discourse that people with disabilities are whole, they desire love and affection, and are worthy of receiving love and affection, just like anybody else.

2.8 Picture This, Sexual Healing: Real visuals

In contrast to the types of films that promote sexual equality through family-friendly visuals showing diverse bodies and communities at home and work, *Picture This*, a film made by the National Film Board of Canada in 2017, and *Sexual Healing: Inside the World of Medically Assisted Sex*, a short documentary produced by VICE in the same year, move depictions of people with diverse abilities into the edgy realm of public sexuality by inviting the camera to capture moments of sexual preparation and engagement in their bedrooms and play spaces. *Picture This* features Andrew Gurza, a self-described “queer cripple” disability awareness consultant, and his community of disabled and

able-bodied friends and family as he and colleague Stella Palikarova prepare for the second annual Deliciously Disabled sex-positive masquerade play party in Toronto, ON. The first party occurred in August of 2015 during the Parapan Am Games, which drew over 1,100 athletes with disabilities from around the world to meet in Toronto. Deliciously Disabled attracted global media attention as “the first of its kind” and attendance was successful (Young, 2015). *Picture This* examines the importance of celebrating the sexual lives of people with disabilities, and tracks preparations for a follow up Deliciously Disabled event until the lack of ticket sales leads to its disappointing cancellation. The organizers determine that without the novelty of being the “first”, media support to promote the event wasn’t sufficient to overcome conflict from within the disability community (Osborne, 2017). Between expected scenes of conversation about disability politics that are appropriate for a documentary of this type, we see imagery of a topless Gurza at speaking events, Palikarova dressing for a night on the town, and the Deliciously Disabled promotional photography shoot that features our protagonists and their friends with disabilities dressed in fetish gear, posed seductively, simulating sexual acts to entice partiers.

Gurza is a provocative spokesperson who lives his message. He appears for speaking events dressed in jeans, leather harness and showing tattoos – an aesthetic typically reserved for gay bars. On Andrew’s curved body, strapped in to his wheelchair, the effect is both defiant and intriguing. He addresses the discomfort of combining two difficult conversations – sex and disability – by putting himself on stage and talking through the audience’s questions with frank openness about his own desires and choices. In his own words,

I deal with leg bags, and condom catheters, and attendants and all that stuff, and all the anxiety around sex, or dating, or boys, or whatever it is. Honestly, for real. ‘Cause typically when people talk about disability, they do it with kid gloves, they’re afraid to really get in the gritty, nitty, shitty part of it. And I’m not afraid to do that, because it’s my life. (Osborne, 2017)

Gurza knows that he defies normative ideas about what sexualized bodies should look like. Desirable men on screen adhere to heteronormative standards of physical fitness and ability. Especially so in the gay community, as Gurza explains:

Coming out and saying “I’m queer” was easy. Coming out and saying “I’m also queer and disabled” was extremely hard. Convincing people that I am sexually viable, especially in my case, where all the men have been socialized to see the able-bodied, good-looking, muscular, white male ready to fuck. Then I roll in, like a big piece of moving furniture, and then they go (gasp) “I don’t know how to – I have

no framework for this”. [...] all that fakeness that people put on goes away. ‘Cause you’re confronting them with two scary truths: sex and disability. (Osborne, 2017)

In this film, Gurza describes and shows us what sexual interaction includes for him. He illuminates that which is seldom seen and complicates ideas about what constitutes a sexual interaction. A promotional photograph used for the first Deliciously Disabled party shows him nude save for a leather harness, a condom catheter and a colostomy bag attached to his leg. At a Realwheels Sexy Voice Theatre event in Vancouver, he explains that the bag needs to be included in his sex play with a partner. In the moments leading to an intimate interaction, he doesn’t want to phone his personal support worker (PSW) and ask for help removing the bag so that he can be sexual. Instead he asks his partner to help him, and this removal of medical paraphernalia along with the vulnerability of needing assistance folds into building intimacy. “I like that I’m different, I like that my body is curved, I like that when I’m naked I don’t look normative and I think my disability enhances my sexual identity a lot.” In scenes intercut with images of Gurza’s sexualized body, we also see the pragmatic, medicalized nudity that his life includes. He is shown naked, being hoisted from his bed into his wheelchair by a female PSW, and then wheeled into the shower to have his face shaved and hair washed by the PSW’s gloved hands. In contrast to the bathroom montage in *The Fundamentals of Caring*, there is no embarrassment from either participant: the attendant is professional and attentive; Andrew’s body is on full display. Vulnerability is an accepted way of life for Gurza, not a novelty. As Spencer Williams says in the documentary *Sexual Healing: Inside the World of Medically Assisted Sex*, “If you’re a person with disability, there’s a certain level of vulnerability you have to be okay with (Sciortino, 2016).”

Picture This includes a remarkable conversation between Gurza and his close friend, Tishane Dune, as they talk together on his bed, both fully clothed. After realising that the Deliciously Disabled party will be cancelled, Gurza complains about criticism from within the disability community that the party publicizes and fetishizes their sexuality when they are fighting hard to earn and protect this as a private right. Gurza isn’t afraid to be fetishized; his exhibitionism enjoys the attention of presenting himself sexually in public circumstances and provoking response. “People want to fetishize me, go ahead. To be frank, I’d rather be fetishized than discriminated against. I’d rather be fetishized than told I don’t exist. I’d rather be seen as a fetish than not seen at all.” Dune becomes pensive and spends a moment with her hand to her mouth while she digests Gurza’s comments. She then slowly replies, “I don’t like that. I totally see what you’re saying, on the spectrum of prejudice and discrimination that’s kind of like the next step forward. But aren’t we trying to get so much more ahead?” Dune is a Black woman. In this moment, Gurza’s identity as a White male comes into focus. He has no experience of the history of fetishization of women and

Black people that results in superficial assumptions at best and violence at worst. Gurza's concern is that "in gay male media, which is geared towards sex, there's no hot guy in a chair". The intersection of all of these marginalized identities – female, colour, disabled, queer – is rich territory for exploring stories. The visual beauty of this scene is the simplicity of two friends on a large white bed with natural light coming in through the large window behind them. The camera floats between the eye-levels of each character and includes close-up frames of their individual faces, medium close-ups that connect them in the frame, and a wider frame revealing a few red accents in the room that pick up the red pattern in Dune's dress. The filmmaker's approach is respectful and intuitive, and captures an authentic exchange of ideas and emotions between intelligent friends in an intimate space.

Weaving a parallel narrative to Gurza's, his colleague and friend, Stella Palikarova appears on screen in physically vulnerable and provocative scenarios throughout the film. She lives with spinal muscular atrophy and talks about the challenges of sexual engagement when she is reliant on personal support workers for her physical access to the world. If a PSW is uncomfortable with any aspect of sexuality, they can refuse to engage with a client's request and essentially deny services, which, Dune informs us, in the case of sexuality is a fundamental human right. Palikarova's access to sex relies on her PSW's comfort with Palikarova's access to sex. In the scene where she explains this, Palikarova's female PSW applies Palikarova's makeup and dresses her for a date. She smooths fishnet stocking over her legs and adjusts Palikarova's breasts into a black, rhinestone-encrusted brassiere. She sprays Palikarova with perfume and picks condoms out of a drawer for her purse. The visuals echo date-night boudoir scenes in movies where girlfriends share makeup and ask for opinions about their looks before venturing out. In this case the supporting character is also Palikarova's surrogate body who fastens her into her wheelchair when beautification is complete. Photographs of Palikarova taken to promote the Deliciously Disabled party show her in flattering lingerie, surrounded by other bodies of all genders scarcely covered by lace, jewels, masks and champagne glasses. Her voice tells us,

In the bedroom is one of the places where I can feel truly free with whoever I am. It's all about us, it's all about what's happening at that moment, it's all about the enjoyment, the pleasure. And I'm multi-orgasmic, so I guess that's part of it too, there's a certain kind of freedom in having that kind of release. I don't necessarily feel disabled, right, I just feel like a woman who's having great sex. (Osborne, 2017)

During the photography session, Palikarova smoulders directly into the camera while a muscled man nuzzles her neck. Her wheelchair is framed as an intriguing accessory rather than an inhibition. *Picture This* shows us diverse bodies confident in sexual and non-sexual circumstances while the speakers talk openly about their lives. We rarely see these types of bodies on screen clothed, let alone seeing

them naked or dressed for sex play. *Picture This* shares images of diverse bodies on display, being handled, adorned in leather and lace, being photographed, being adored by their owners and partners. The film pushes diversity representation into visual immersion that is uniquely beyond the terrain of literature or academia.

Sexual Healing: Inside the World of Medically Assisted Sex is a short documentary featuring Spencer Williams, a young radio host who lives with cerebral palsy. Williams benefits from the services of Sensual Solutions, a Vancouver agency that provides sex surrogates, or “intimacy coaches”, for clients with disabilities. The film shows traditional beauty shots of Vancouver, Spencer in his daily routine at home and at CiTR radio station where he hosts a show called All Access Pass, and moments of erotic engagement between Williams and an intimacy coach. The woman’s identity is masked through selective focus and strategic framing of Williams, who lies in the bed with her, clearly visible. They are both naked. Her hands massage and caress his bare arms, chest and face while they talk about what the service means for him: He gains confidence in his ability to engage with a sexual partner, he benefits from sensual touch in contrast to the clinical touch from medical caregivers, and he enjoys the pleasure of his body (Sciortino, 2016). The camera operator establishes Williams’ protagonism with camera frames near his eye level, and by showing genuine tenderness and enjoyment between Williams and his coach. He is physically vulnerable, lying back with legs curved to one side and a curled fist hovering near his shoulder; however, his playfulness and thoughtful conversation with the woman convey dignity and attractiveness. These images demonstrate that masculinity can include so much more than the narrow spectrum of, in Gurza’s words, the “able-bodied, good-looking, muscular, white male ready to fuck”. Williams is the only character with a disability that we see on screen in this film, but he is surrounded by experienced colleagues who understand and support his right to pleasure. The VICE journalist, Karley Sciortino is a guest on his home turf, and over the 20-minute segment she lets down her investigative guard and flirts with Spencer with genuine enjoyment. *Sexual Healing* includes depictions and discussions of healthy sexuality, sexuality and disability, and medically assisted sexuality provided by a trained sex worker. All of these are rare topics on screen, more likely found in these ground-breaking documentaries than in fictional films. The deficiency of scripted narratives showing diverse sexuality, however, is our social poverty. As Trace reminds us, the “shaming silence that surrounds our collective sex lives is what leads to us all having bad sex. It is why we judge other people’s sexuality. It is why we don’t know how to respect one another’s bodies and one another’s boundaries” (Trace, 2014, pp. 5-6). Film scenes showing active consent, and genuine tenderness and enjoyment broaden our collective understanding of what pleasure is possible within and between bodies.

Screen-based storytelling is an ideal medium to explore the multi-sensory vitality of bodies, minds and spirits being mutually nourished. Al Vernacchio is an American sexual health educator whose vision is for youth, and through them, all of us -

to know their values, who believe themselves worthy of love, who feel good about their bodies, who see pleasure as a means to build intimacy and connection with one another, and who live their lives not fearing mistakes but using them as lessons to reorient themselves toward success. (Vernacchio, *For Goodness Sex: Changing the Way We Talk to Teens About Sexuality, Values, and Health*, 2014, p. 13)

Vernacchio's vision includes bodies of all shapes, sizes, abilities and orientations. The idea that mistakes become lessons that reorient us toward success is the foundation of story structure. Characters on screen perpetually seek "pleasure as a means to build intimacy and connection" with themselves and others in innumerable ways. Audience members show up in the movie theatre to be taken on a cathartic journey that informs our own lives and our appreciation of the world we live in. Whether edgy or demure, broader character portrayals inclusive of infinite human physical and sexual manifestations can only enrich the stories and the types of stories on offer to all of us.

3 Insights & conclusions

Upon reflection of the media samples mentioned in this paper that deliver engaging and progressive stories featuring or inclusive of characters with disabilities, it seems that a key factor is the creator's commitment to discovering and conveying truthful experiences of individuals with disabilities. A baseline value of authenticity is likely to produce holistic character development rather than flat stereotypes, pragmatic and emotional choices that address a person's abilities rather than aspiration for hegemonic standards, and innovative use of cinematic techniques that convey the character's reality from their own point of view rather than from the point of view of an able-bodied audience viewing someone Different. Regarding inclusion of a character's sexuality, the same dynamics apply. A filmmaker needs to believe that people with diverse abilities possess desire and are desirable to the same extent as any other character in the world of the story. A human's sexuality, regardless of its expression, is inseparable from a human's essential self, as Vernacchio tells us:

Our sexuality is the way that our bodies, our gender, our sexual and romantic orientations come together and make us who we are, and impact how we put ourselves in the world and how the world reacts to us. We're not sexually active people 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. That would be exhausting. But we are sexual people from the moment we're born to the moment we die, every minute of every day. Our sexuality is a fundamental facet of our humanity. We can't separate ourselves from it. And so, we have to learn how to deal with it in positive and healthy ways. (Vernacchio, Sexuality Education, 2015)

Upon this foundation of authentic inclusion, cinematic and narrative choices are applied to the story at hand and an audience is offered the opportunity for genuine engagement with the full spectrum of humanity. The surest way to craft authentic and diverse characters is for non-disabled creators to collaborate with people who possess first-hand disability expertise, preferably in great enough numbers so as to avoid the isolation of tokenism both on screen and in the production process.

3.1 A framework for understanding: Isolation & the effects of proportions on cultural representation

The Cinema of Isolation written by Martin F. Norden and the documentary film *Diffability Hollywood* from director Adrian Esposito, document how characters with disfigurements or disabilities in early cinema were primarily ostracized, lonely, socially isolated characters throughout on-screen narratives. From early feature film depictions like the titular role in *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1939), Lenny in *Of Mice and Men* (1939), to John

in *The Elephant Man* (1980), “monsters” were portrayed as dangerous, vulnerable to manipulation by those who would use their loyalty for evil means, or well-intentioned but unrestrained in their strength or passions and better off constrained or killed. Lawrence Carter-Long, representative of the National Council on Disability, comments that “You very rarely see the disabled character as the lead, as the love interest, as the person who gets the girl or the guy, depending on what gender the character might be” (Esposito, 2016). Storylines, characterization, and filmmaking tools contribute to this isolation on screen:

Most movies have tended to isolate disabled characters from their able-bodied peers as well as from each other. This phenomenon [...] is reflected not only in the typical storylines of the films but also to a large extent in the ways that filmmakers have visualized the characters interacting with their environments: they have often used the basic tools of their trade – framing, editing, sound, lighting, set design elements (e.g., fences, windows, staircase bannisters) – to suggest a physical or symbolic separation of disabled characters from the rest of society. (Norden, 1994, p. 1)

It is most common for filmmakers to position the camera frame and use the tools of post-production to enact an able-bodied point of view that the – presumably able-bodied – audience relates to:

By encouraging audience members to perceive the world depicted in movies, and by implication the world in general, from this perspective and thus associate themselves with able-bodied characters, this strategy has a two-fold effect: it enhances the disabled characters’ isolation and “Otherness” by reducing them to objectifications of pity, fear, scorn, etc. – in short, objects of spectacle – as a means of pandering to the needs of the able-bodied majority, and it contributes to a sense of isolation and self-loathing among audience members with disabilities. (Norden, 1994, p. 1)

The social and physical isolation shown on screen often promotes and has justified mass institutionalization of people with disabilities, with devastating effects for most of them. However, when people with physical diversity create their own media, an entirely different narrative emerges, as noted in some of the non-fiction films discussed above. We are more likely to see visual and audio techniques that bring the audience into the diversely-abled character’s reality, and storylines tend to reflect the richness of community and adaptability that shapes their experience. It is logical that when someone is personally informed about an experience, they will bring greater authenticity to the portrayal. An equal influence might be the strength evoked in numbers when two or more diversely-abled creators are able to join together to raise their voices and speak a more textured truth.

In 1977, Rosabeth Moss Kanter published a study that illuminates the “effects of proportions on group life”. Specifically, she examined how being a minority or “token” representative of a certain kind of person among a “dominant” culture of people who perceive the token’s difference as their primary identification, affects the token’s behaviour and perceived behaviour in some remarkable ways. Kanter observed women in a male-dominated sales force and noticed key dynamics that influenced the women’s behaviour and relationships with their male colleagues. “The proportional rarity of tokens is associated with three perceptual phenomena: visibility, polarization, and assimilation” (Kanter, 1977):

First, tokens, one by one, have higher VISIBILITY than dominants looked at alone: they capture a larger awareness share. A group member's awareness share, averaged over shares of other individuals of the same social type, declines as the proportion of total membership occupied by the category increases, because each individual becomes less and less surprising, unique, or note-worthy; in Gestalt terms, they more easily become "ground" rather than "figure." But for tokens there is a "law of increasing returns": as individuals of their type come to represent a smaller numerical proportion of the group, they potentially capture a larger share of the group members' awareness. (Kanter, 1977)

When a character with a disability is the only non-able-bodied person on screen, their uniqueness is highly visible and novel. It is difficult for them to do anything that isn’t noticed against the backdrop of the able-bodied majority. This applies to portrayals on screen, but also to the production process where creative ingredients are gathered that get baked into the finished story. Visibility means lack of privacy, greater attention on faults as well as strengths, and perception as a member of a category rather than as an individual among other individuals in the dominant group. “A token's visibility stems from characteristics – attributes of a master status – that threaten to blot out other aspects of the token's performance. While the token captures attention, it is often for discrepant characteristics, for the auxiliary traits that provide token status.” Tokens find their abilities are eclipsed by their physical appearance – especially so if they embody a visible disability – and have to work hard to have achievements noticed or may choose to underperform so as not to be accused of “showing up” the dominant group. In contrast, within a group where upwards of 10% membership (as long as that equals more than 1 person) is comprised of the token’s social group, then those individual tokens can be seen as diverse from each other and begin to express their individuation.

The second perceptual tendency is POLARIZATION or exaggeration of differences:

The presence of a person bearing a different set of social characteristics makes members of a numerically dominant group more aware both of their commonalities with and their differences from the token. There is a tendency to exaggerate the extent of the differences, especially because tokens are by definition too few in number to prevent the application of familiar generalizations or stereotypes. It is thus easier for the commonalities of dominants to be defined in contrast to the token than it would be in a more numerically equal situation. One person can also be perceptually isolated and seen as cut off from the group more easily than many, who begin to represent a significant proportion of the group itself. (Kanter, 1977)

In a writer's room where a dozen people create stories about a cast of characters whose lives play out over the weeks and months of a television series, if there is only one writer with embodied difference from the rest, that person is likely to become responsible for assuring the dominants that no special treatment is necessary, that the characters with disabilities won't impede the other characters' adventures, or that humour at the expense of the writer or the character with disability is permissible. Dominant members become aware of how their behaviour is different from the token's and find ways to point out these differences. The token must then also acknowledge the differences and position themselves as non-threatening to dominant culture. This will understandably lead to erroneous representation of the disability experience on screen, which can then garner criticism for misrepresentation. If there are more creators with disabilities in the room, their numbers can anchor their knowledge of distinct experiences in order to increase the quality of what appears on screen, and affirm that they are worth creating exceptions for within and among the dominants' experiences.

The third perceptual tendency is ASSIMILATION, which involves the use of stereotypes or familiar generalizations about a person's social type:

The characteristics of a token tend to be distorted to fit the generalization. If there are enough people of the token's type to let discrepant examples occur, it is possible that the generalization will change to accommodate the accumulated cases. But if individuals of that type are only a small proportion of the group, it is easier to retain the generalization and distort the perception of the token. (Kanter, 1977)

If one sole character with embodied difference on screen must represent "the disability experience" they will certainly fall short of performing all the diversity within the broad spectrum of disability, which opens the door for the projection of generalizations upon them. Even within a singular condition like muscular dystrophy, there are myriad ways that bodies are affected and lives unfold. It is likely that in attempting to encompass the entire experience, a character will flatten into a

stereotype and inadvertently affirm an audience's perception of disability stereotypes. These stereotypes are well documented in Norden's genealogy of the cinema: the tragic victim, disfigured villain, sweet innocent, civilian superstar and the obsessive avenger, among others, are alive and well on contemporary screens. The solution is to include more numerous characters with physical diversity, aiming for equal representation to the actual population, so that each character is allowed to individuate and contribute to the story uniquely. As we see in non-fiction media and scripted stories made by creators with disability expertise, characters and narratives become deeper, broader, more complex, and the boundaries between aspects attributed to a disability experience and those relatable to any viewer become more porous.

3.2 Organic technology

A relationship with technology is central to creating films, and also to the functionality of many people who live with disability to varying degrees. The level of comfort that a creator has with the technology required for diversely-abled collaborators to function will correspond directly to the level of naturalism in how technology is used on screen by diversely-abled characters. In *Picture This* Andrew Gurza and Stella Palikarova both demonstrate how technology is fundamental to their access to the world at large and to sexual expression. In *Margarita With a Straw*, Laila uses a motorized scooter for mobility, a straw to drink, and an iPad to supplement her verbal communication. Her reliance on each of these tools and others is so organic that her family home and her social spaces don't notice their presence. She is not framed as an intrusion, rather as a fully functional member of her community. Her use of these technologies depends on her circumstances and mood; they aren't consistent. When she wants these devices to do so, they provide opportunities for sensual engagement. When she doesn't want them to, they are entirely pragmatic mechanisms, just as our bodies perform in numerous ways according to our intentions. The writer/director of this story grew up with a cousin who has cerebral palsy and is familiar with the functionality of this condition. Because the technology is not a novelty to Shonali Bose, it does not appear so within the world of her film. Comfort with technology is also present in the book, *The Revised Fundamentals of Caring*, written by Jonathan Evison, who spent several years as a caregiver. Evison's able-bodied protagonist enters the world of muscular dystrophy and quickly acclimatizes; thereafter the story focuses on social dynamics. This contrasts with the film, *The Fundamentals of Caring*, whose writer/director does not have first-hand experience with disability and so the technology remains a novelty on screen, past the point where a caregiver would have relaxed into familiarity with it. Rob Burnett's personal discomfort with muscular dystrophy and its paraphernalia holds his audience in a state of perpetual discomfort with muscular dystrophy and maintains that Trevor's life is a Problem.

Spectacle and technology

In January 2019 I attended two plays that illuminated the difference between technology used for the purpose of spectacle versus technological innovation that is organically born out of practicality. These paralleled the appropriation of disability stories for the same contrasting purposes – and in fact one show was about life with disability while the other was not.

Kim Collier directed the inaugural production of *The Full Light of Day*, which was produced by Electric Company Theatre (ECT) and staged in Vancouver. The play is about the family of a real estate mogul whose lack of integrity has repercussions (Brooks, 2019). ECT and Collier are known for incorporating consumer technology into live theatre productions well before many other theatre companies embraced items like personal tablets and hand-held cameras on stage. Media attention on this production highlighted the “epic” scale of the technical spectacle:

The Full Light of Day will rank as one of the most epic-scale plays staged in Vancouver in 2019. Featuring 14 live-streaming cameras and projections, the new Electric Company Theatre production features an all-star cast led by Gabrielle Rose, an array of technologies, and a series of short, virtual-reality films that screen in the lobby. (Smith J. , 2018)

The technology in this show included hidden and visible on-stage cameras that captured details of the live action, which was projected onto large screens around the performers. This allowed the audience to see facial expressions that otherwise wouldn't translate in a venue as large as The Vancouver Playhouse. In an interview with *The Georgia Straight* Collier explains, “With the camera, you can get closer to the character and you can see the things that the script demands. I want everything to be live for the audience and not mediated.” (Smith J. , 2018) For example, in a lovemaking scene where a couple is horizontal on a bed positioned upstage from the audience, an overhead camera magnified the woman's face in a cinematic close-up frame so we could see her conflict about her drunk husband's enthusiasm. The screens as backdrops allowed instant projection of locations that would otherwise take time to set up with physical set changes and props. The characters moved instantly from rural to urban, and interior to exterior environments as the images changed behind them. The novelty in this technique was that projected backgrounds were film clips that included motion rather than static photographs, which added dynamic to the mise-en-scènes. The technology wasn't seamless, however. A time delay between the actors' amplified voices and the projected images of the actors' faces was disorienting. It prevented full surrender to the story and kept my awareness on the technology rather than on the human drama that the technology was intended to enhance. There was also unnecessary technological use that led to conflict about where

to pay attention. A full-sized car came on stage to contain a scene where two characters talk while they drive through the city. The actors were clearly lit and their amplified voices were audible. Cameras inside the car magnified their faces and these were projected onto the backdrop screens along with environmental images of their moving location. I was torn between watching the giant projections of their faces (that were out of sync with their voices) or focusing my attention on their actual bodies in front of me. In this case the redundant technology simply doubled the live action and split my focus. I don't recall any of their dialogue. *The Full Light of Day* was not intended to address disability; all the performers appeared able-bodied. My perception was that Collier's desire to have technology bring the audience closer to her performers instead produced the opposite effect; emotions felt highly mediated and impersonal amid such self-conscious production tricks.

In the same month I attended a performance of *This Is The Point*, a play from Ahuri Theatre based in Toronto, directed by Karin Randoja and presented at The Cultch in Vancouver. The play explores love and sex through two couples whose lives are affected by disability, and also incorporates personal technology and projection into the live performance (Diamanti, Watson, Serra, Randoja, & MacDougall, 2019). In this case, the technology enhanced the story and enriched the characters' communication rather than competing with them for the audience's attention. For example, Tony is a non-verbal adult who uses a motorized scooter for mobility and a low-tech, head-mounted stylus pointer with a letterboard to spell out his dialogue. In order for the audience to see Tony's words, a video camera was mounted to the back of his wheelchair and the view of his letterboard was projected onto a large screen behind him. The audience was prompted to speak along with his pointing so he could hear that we understood him. In a scene about the chaos of life at home with three young children, the video camera on its tripod became a child with cerebral palsy while his able-bodied father, Dan, dressed him for school. The projection showed a low view of the adult actor's live face moving closer and further as he interacted with his child. The audience saw Dan's full body on stage caring for his child, and the camera's/son's perspective with limited range of motion, reflective of the child's muscle capacity. When Dan moved close to the camera the image was particularly intimate as he cajoled his son into excitement about the day. This live POV projection transitioned seamlessly into pre-filmed POV footage of the child being handed off to his mother who brushed his teeth, while Dan raced around the live stage getting himself dressed. With only one actor on stage, we understood a father's experience of family life, a son's perspective of two parents and his siblings as they entered and exited his POV frame, and through the son we met a mother interacting with all three of her children and her husband even though he was the only person on stage. The technique was pragmatic, remarkably novel, and organically immersive in this family's world. The technology in *This Is The Point* was intrinsic to the characters' expressions. It

enhanced their physical and verbal abilities, and connected geographic and time distances between performers and the audience. Combinations of high and low technology reflected practical choices and facilitated audience inclusion through direct-address explanations and requests for non-confrontational participation, i.e. acting as Tony's voice. The show educated its audience about how certain bodies navigate the world and relate to each other, and melted a perceptual and physical barrier between those performing and those observing. It humbly delivered an inspired communal experience that live theatre is uniquely positioned to do. In contrast, staging in *The Full Light of Day* created a barrier between the live performers and the audience by prioritizing the technological spectacle over the story, and by introducing a "solution" to a show that might not have had a problem in need of solving. To apply this lesson to film and video projects, introducing technology whose primary purpose is functionality, rather than attempting to spectacularize technology, will likely produce organic results on screen to the same degree that I witnessed on these stages.

The technology of protagonism

New York, I Love You, *The Little Death*, and *Margarita With a Straw* use the tools of filmmaking to convey protagonism and invite an audience into the reality of the character with embodied differences. Camera placement and movement is the most prominent influence over how an audience perceives a character's experience. Placing the camera at the eye-level of the character and moving the camera at the pace of the character's natural physical movement will immediately establish protagonism for the character with a disability. This might be a low camera position and smooth dolly movement if the character uses a motorized scooter or wheelchair. The camera might be slightly tilted upwards if the character is prone, as in the few point-of-view shots in the film *The Sessions* where the paralyzed character of Mark O'Brien moves about on a wheeled gurney (Lewin & O'Brien, 2012). It might include fast or slow panning movements according to the muscular definition of the character. Most conversations in *Margarita With a Straw* are filmed at Laila's eye-level with other characters seated next to her. Her frames often include other characters, which establishes her connected relationship to the world and combats the historical isolation of characters with disabilities on screen that Norden documents. Also as exemplified in *Margarita With a Straw*, avoiding wide frames from an able-bodied perspective that position the character with disabilities as isolated within or different from the able-bodied landscape will ensure an empathetic presentation on screen. Moments of fatigue or frustration for the character with disability can be conveyed in close frames that remain inside the person's emotional experience without holding them in contrast to able-bodied standards. Audio techniques also bring an audience into a character's reality. Audio design in *The Little Death* treats ASL dialogue as equal to verbal dialogue in the way that non-diegetic sound pauses during conversations. This cues an audience to value various means of expression equally. *New York*,

I Love You uses sound design and subtitles as a metaphor for how a person with impaired hearing perceives the verbal world as accessible or not through the use of text when two ASL characters speak to each other. There is no diegetic sound in the segment, which demands that a hearing audience relinquish the sense of sound as a source of information in this story and join the visual communication of the protagonists. Audio design for characters with speech variation could also replicate their expression through pacing, use of text, and in tandem with strategic camera frames. Wardrobe and production design can all contribute to showing the reality of a character's environment. Consultation with the actor about their character's clothing choices would likely include clothes that feel good, that are sensible for the character's physical reality, and that flatter and express their full sensual and sexual selves. Design of the character's home or work space, upon consultation, can also demonstrate the practical choices made by the person who inhabits the space without drawing attention to the novelty of those choices from an outsider's view. The opening lines of the stage play *This is The Point* are, "We do things at our own pace." Flexibility of pace for both the story and the production will also go a long way to reflect the reality of the character with embodied differences. Advance planning and iterative adaptation would help to design the production process and story's rhythm to include bodies with diverse ways of interacting with the world. The easiest benchmark for use of inclusive technology is simply to consider how the character with a disability perceives the world and then work to recreate that experience. No doubt there is further innovation to come.

The technology of intimacy: Innovative approaches to sexual engagement

Margarita With a Stram, *The Last Taboo*, *Picture This*, *Sexual Healing*, and *Dina* all present innovative approaches to sexual engagement that reflect their characters' unique desires adapted to their individual physical abilities. In *Dina*, Scott's asexuality doesn't exclude him from romance, marriage, and heterosexual friendship. His orientation isn't approached as an identity problem, instead it's framed as a relationship concern wherein he is sexually incompatible with his wife. Incompatibility occurs in many types of sexual relationships and is a sensitive subject to address between the implicated partners, even more so among platonic male friends. And yet, Scott's community doesn't demonize or banish him. They are accustomed to designing lifestyles that meet personal needs rather than to impress bystanders. Scott's unique masculinity is honoured within the world of the film. In *Margarita With a Stram*, Laila's involvement with three lovers who all inhabit different bodies, genders and abilities doesn't rock the foundation of her identity. Instead, the variety clarifies her personal choices and the experiences become threads in the fabric of her maturing self. In *The Last Taboo*, many characters explain how they engage sexually given their individual bodies, and how they engage with a variety of partners according to whom they find attractive and intriguing.

They perceive that the purpose of sexual engagement is pleasure and connection, and remain open to pursuing those outcomes in whatever shape or form makes the most sense. *Sexual Healing* broadens the conversation to include transactional sex, which is valued as therapeutic and provides for specific physical accommodations. Sessions with a sex coach or a sexual surrogate prioritize learning and exploration without the pressure to perform that is often implicit in a new social encounter. Some of the Sensual Solutions clients regard their sessions as practice for future partners, some regard them as the extent of their sexual lives. In either case, clients and coaches discuss what the client wants, practice active consent, and create iterative experiences that both acknowledge the client's physical ability and elevate standards for intentional lovemaking. The characters in *Picture This* delight in playful sex, public and private sex, performative sex, political sex, and discussions about sex that challenge hegemonic assumptions about normative sexual expression and sexual expression for humans with disabilities. They invite each other and their partners to expand boundaries about what feels good, what is fun, and what is permitted to show up in the bedroom. All of these stories move past the narrow boundaries of how sexuality is usually presented in screen-based narratives. They broaden the conversation to include more realistic, accessible and interesting dynamics for personal fulfillment, and exploration of story and character. When a filmmaker is willing to include the innovative reality of their characters' full sexual selves, audiences have the opportunity to broaden our understanding of ourselves and to build empathy with each other.

Social technology

Astrologer Rob Brezsny writes about a creator's contribution and influence on society, which certainly includes filmmakers:

Many of us don't always know what we feel. We may have a vivid sense that we feel something, but we're not sure what it is. That's why musicians, writers, actors, and other creative people play such a crucial role in our emotional lives. Their work can help us articulate the enigmas fermenting within us. But here's the problem: A majority of the artists who are easiest for us to find aren't exceptionally smart or original; they specialize in expressing hackneyed feelings. Meanwhile, many of the very best creators "remain in relative obscurity because of their resistance to formula efforts," writes journalist Alan Cabal. "Mediocrities latch onto whatever hits and repeat it endlessly in pursuit of cash or celebrity or both." If we look to the latter for illumination, we're cheated. (Brezsny, 2019)

This idea speaks to raising the bar for screen-based narratives to hold a vision for what inclusion and equity look like, which is beyond the traditional media producer's goal of financial gain. I believe that

long-term change, particularly regarding inclusive representation on screen – of diverse bodies, but also of full selves – is accomplished one film and one filmmaker at a time. Over time the growing number of high-quality stories become easier to find, and as more people’s perceptions are changed by those films, tolerance for mediocre filmmaking wanes. I don’t believe that stereotypes will cease to exist on screen, but hegemony evolves and the public’s lessening appetite for appropriation does have financial repercussions.

Ghost in the Shell is a beloved Japanese manga series written and illustrated by Masamune Shirow, first serialized in 1989. It has been adapted into films and television series for international audiences over many years and in 2017 Paramount Pictures made a feature film version with Caucasian actor, Scarlett Johansson in the leading role of Kusanagi. According to IMDbPro, the film’s production budget was \$110 million (*Ghost in the Shell* (2017), n.d.). It grossed just over \$40.5 million domestically: a financial failure that has been largely attributed to public backlash against the studio’s casting choice as “whitewashing”:

The casting controversy that erupted in 2014 set the stage. When Johansson – who’d proven herself an action star in the *Avengers* movie as well as her solo turn in 2014’s *Lucy*, which bowed to \$43.9 million – was cast, there was an immediate outcry because an Asian or Asian-American actress hadn’t been cast to play a character who was Japanese in the original, even if her identity involves a brain implanted in a cyborg’s body. While groups like the Media Action Network for Asian Americans were among the first to object, others took up the cause: A Care2 petition authored by Julie Rodriguez, calling for the part to be recast, attracted more than 100,000 signatures. (Kilday, 2017)

This is just one example of a sea change in public appetite for cultural misrepresentation demonstrated by numerous recent articles that list “the most whitewashed stories/characters in Hollywood films.” It is a remarkable contrast to the tradition of casting Caucasian actors in non-White roles in such classic movies as the 1961 version of *West Side Story*, where Russian-American actress Natalie Wood plays a woman of Puerto Rican descent; or the 1961 adaptation of *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* in which American Mickey Rooney appears in yellowface as a Chinese man. *Ghost in the Shell* also warns of the financial repercussions of failing to observe this new public distaste for cultural appropriation (Jeunesse, 2018). Social media movements have real consequences. There are many reasons to aim high.

3.3 Casting

GLAAD produces an annual report called “Where We Are on TV” (WWAOTV) that tracks the presence of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) characters in scripted broadcast, cable, and original streaming television shows. The 2018-2019 report states,

All three platforms GLAAD tracked - but cable especially - need to include more LGBTQ characters who are also living with a disability. There are four disabled LGBTQ characters on cable. Advocacy group RespectAbility reports that more than one-third of adult LGBTQ people identify as having a disability of some kind. There is still much work to do before television reflects the full diversity of our community. (GLAAD, 2018, p. 6)

Along with numbers of characters, the WWAOTV report reveals how many actors with authentic LGBTQ knowledge are cast in those roles. “It is no longer enough just to have an LGBTQ character present to win LGBTQ audience’s attention, there needs to be nuance and depth to their story and they should reflect the full diversity of our community” (GLAAD, 2018, p. 4). Recommendations in the report include prioritizing actors who identify as LGBTQ to play characters with similar orientation until the industry reaches employment ratios of LGBTQ actors commensurate with the general TV-watching population. The same holds true for characters and actors with authentic disability experience. The *Ruderman White Paper on Employment of Actors with Disabilities in Television*, which references GLAAD’s aspirational standards, sums up the present moment regarding the selection of performers for on-screen portrayals of people with diverse abilities:

In our current media atmosphere, we have become used to a group’s right of self-representation. A white actor on screen in blackface is unheard of nowadays because we as a nation recognize that there is absolutely no reason why a black actor wouldn’t play that part. Sadly, Hollywood still white-washes Asian characters on occasion, but these choices are followed by public outrage and nation-wide criticism. However, when an able-bodied actor plays a character with a disability, the criticism is limited. It’s as if the nation in general dismisses the abilities of people with disabilities to such a degree that it doesn’t even occur to them to wonder why they are seeing Artie in *Glee* played by the able-bodied Kevin McHale. (Kopić & Woodburn, 2016, p. 6)

The white paper investigates the “frequency of actors with disabilities on the top-ten television shows toward the end of the 2015-2016 TV season” and the same for “the top twenty-one original content shows featured on streaming platforms” by examining a one-week sample of

programming. In the sample week, occurring in March 2016, out of 265 total characters across 31 shows surveyed, 6 characters presented characteristics of visible and congenital disabilities: 2 in cable and broadcasting and 4 characters in streaming shows. Out of those 6 characters, only 2 of them are played by an actor with a disability.

It's difficult to imagine that among the almost 20% of the American population that identifies as living with a disability of some type, there aren't options to fill four extra roles with qualified actors. Casting actors for film and television work in North America occurs predominantly through a network of Casting Directors acting as representatives of production companies, who liaise with Talent Agents representing their acting clients. One of the largest online platforms for this process is ActorsAccess:

ActorsAccess is the primary actor's registration site of its parent company, Breakdown Services. Its founder, Gary Marsh, states there are approximately 600,000 active users out of a total number of 850,000 members. [...] Of those actors the total number of actors with disability equals a little over 4,000 members.

The way the site works for the [person with disability] PWD community is that when an actor is submitted for a role, his/her disability is not listed; however, if a Casting Director is searching for a PWD then the results deliver actors that match the need of the role. This functionality is very important because while a disability should not hinder an actor from being considered for a role, the system promotes actors with a specific disability when it is part of the story of a particular role.

(Kopić & Woodburn, 2016, p. 14)

In regions where a political climate prohibits inclusion of diverse citizens and their representation in the media, perhaps casting able-bodied actors is necessary to accomplish a film project, as in the example of the Indian film, *Margarita With a Straw*, noted below. However, in an entertainment market as developed as North America's, tolerance for ableism in casting should be in fast decline.

Among the scripted media examples included in this paper, only *Switched at Birth*, and *Master of None: New York, I Love You* employed performers with disabilities to enact characters with disabilities. All the other actors must have studied their character's conditions to varying degrees in order to fulfill their roles. Results range from broad caricature, as in Magda's amputated hand and eye patch in *Jane the Virgin*; to passable facsimile as in Trevor's muscular dystrophy in *The Revised Fundamentals of Caring*; to believably realistic, as in Laila's cerebral palsy in *Margarita With a Straw*.

Results, no doubt, depend on a combined commitment to authenticity on behalf of the actor and director of the show. For example, in a 2016 interview with *Cultural Weekly*, Shonali Bose explains how determined she was to find actors with disabilities to play her two diversely-abled protagonists and how the country's stigmas around disability and women's sexuality constrained her process:

There aren't any actresses with CP [in India]. I knew that. And no blind actors. There aren't any actors with disabilities in the Indian film industry, yet. [...] I am very connected with all the institutions for CP in the country — because of my family having founded the first one. We put out a big call, traveled, met many people, and did different kinds of auditions — not direct auditions with lines, but just figuring it out. I felt like one girl possibly may have been able to do it. Then, she was like, "There's no way I can do the sex scenes." But she realized, "You can't cut the sex scenes." "Yeah, obviously not," I said. "I can't do them, even if it's fictional. My family will just die of embarrassment if their daughter does that," she confessed. I found a blind woman who is an actor, a mother in her early thirties. She wasn't ideal, but because of my commitment to those particular disabilities, I would have been ready to adjust my script to the actors. But the sexuality was an obstacle for her, as well. She helped me to train Sayani, to play Khanum. (Stein, 2016)

Bose's desire to serve the story and the characters in her script drove her above and beyond what is usually expected from a director in preparation to film. Ultimately, she and the potential candidates were hobbled by facets of India's culture that shame women's sexual expression. Bose then decided to work with the experienced, able-bodied, French actor, Kalki Koechlin as the protagonist, Laila. They agreed to a rigorous training period to ensure Koechlin would be able to portray Laila's emotional and physical circumstances with sufficient authenticity to satisfy Bose's family, who read and watched the film throughout the development process and let Bose know that she was on track:

Kalki is a well-known actor, but still I told her, you have to audition. I saw only ten percent in the audition. She was terrified; so was I. I asked her to commit to me for 4-6 months. "Four months, where you don't do anything else." She agreed. And I said, "At the end of that time, we will abandon the project if we don't get it authentic." But I was in terror until the very last two weeks. Very late in the last two weeks, all of that work in terms of the CP came together. But I think her performance is much more than just getting the CP right. It's nothing like any of her other films. Kalki is luminous in this film. (Stein, 2016)

Bose's dedication to the material, to honouring her cousin's experience as a woman living with CP, and to exploring the sexuality of an Indian woman who comes to identify as bisexual and who lives with a disability shines through in the film. To realize this story in the way she wanted to, she was first willing to train women with disabilities as actors so they could participate in the film, and then was willing to train able-bodied actors about disabilities to the point that their performances were absolutely believable. Had she been able to work with actors with disabilities, no doubt their experience in her film would open the door to future acting opportunities for them, and Bose's statement that "There aren't any actresses with CP [in India]" would begin to erode.

In a 2016 interview with the bloggers of *Pillow Talk* about *The Fundamentals of Caring*, director Rob Burnett discusses his decision to cast an able-bodied actor in the role of Trevor, the character who lives with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy. In contrast to Bose's willingness to work with actors who inhabited first-hand knowledge of their characters' conditions but might require some accommodation, Burnett believed that the long hours of production filming and extreme heat in the Atlanta location would have been too arduous for an actor with DMD to endure:

[...] we actually did consider someone who had cerebral palsy for the role. He was English as well, as it turned out. We did a reading with him and he was quite good, but ultimately I judged him the same way I judged everybody. But as far as getting someone with Duchenne, we talked about it at length and we just thought that the demands of shooting would have been very difficult first and foremost for the kid and also for the film. But I also didn't want to put somebody in a position that was really difficult or so physically hard on somebody that it may have been life threatening. (Keeley & Lyons-Keeley, 2016)

There is no information about specifically what talent or personality the English candidate lacked that justified Burnett's creative choice; however, if an actor with cerebral palsy applied for the job, we can assume he felt himself capable of fulfilling the duties. Burnett's decision to overlook candidates with DMD without their consultation is clear hiring discrimination. His revelation in this interview indicates the level of his lack of awareness about the problem. "Creativity, inclusion, and diversity get overlooked without oversight, explanation, and understanding. Working in the industry comes with the understanding that new locations are involved, sets are built and struck on a weekly basis, and the casting takes place at the pace of the internet" (Kopić & Woodburn, 2016, p. 35). Application of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) is slippery in an industry that operates on custom and efficiency. Burnett's attitude throughout this interview and in others, and his comments about the casting process, reveal an ethos of appropriation. He wants the dramatic

conditions of DMD to make a commercially successful movie without sincere inclusion of the DMD experience, which would require adaptation of his own process.

In the Ruderman white paper, actor Danny Woodburn describes the changes that would have to occur along the entire movie production process in order for the trendy conversation of #diversity to become authentic access. From the very first casting call where actors of all abilities are considered for every role, to holding auditions in a location that is accessible to all bodies, to allowing enough time for preparation of both auditions and performance (i.e. time for a blind actor to have a script translated), to organizing the filming process so that performers and crew who need to rest occasionally can do so, the spirit of the movie industry is ripe for evolution. Performers with invisible disabilities are more likely to hide their conditions for fear of being stigmatized and losing work than to ask for a 10-minute break on set when they need to recharge. Rare creators who do make their sets and meeting rooms inclusive often have success stories about the process and the results. Director Jill Soloway noticed that as more transgender actors, writers and crew joined the *Transparent* team, the storylines became deeper, broader, and more relatable to their audience (Soloway, *She Wants It: Desire, Power, and Toppling the Patriarchy*, 2018). Soloway talks about “staying in my body as the actors work, by prioritizing all of the bodies on the set over the equipment or the money or the time” and reveals that their award-winning shows are routinely accomplished within budget, in a spirit of collaboration and well-being, and comfortably within the hours allocated to filming each day (Soloway, *The Female Gaze - TIFF: Master Class*, 2016). Woodburn echoes this attitude and the broader payoffs available when innovation is embraced:

[H]istory shows that adaption of the ADA has had sweeping overlap into bettering the lives of everyone. In those years prior to the passing of the ADA there was a belief that ramps and curb-cuts would never be used. But once they appeared so did wheelchair-users who before that could not readily navigate the outside world, and as an added benefit mothers with strollers could also navigate more easily. The deaf community has been using text-messaging systems for decades—now it is the most universally used form of electronic communication. [...] Certainly in a field as creative as ours, such innovations are easier than in other fields. What they will find when our audience of 20% is represented is that the rewards for adapting will come back to them. According to the National Disability Institute those 50 million Americans who represent the under-tapped market have an aggregate annual income of more than \$1 trillion and \$220 billion in discretionary spending power. Certainly the door can be open a bit wider to allow more access. (Kopić & Woodburn, 2016, p. 35)

3.4 Going forward

In order to apply these insights to adapting *A One-Handed Novel* into the web-series, *Disease & Desire*, it seems the following are essential: Clark's first-hand experience of MS must inform all choices about Mel's journey. We must seek out collaborators who have personal expertise in the conditions of the book's other characters and involve them in interpreting the story for screen. We must seek out actors, whether experienced or not, who possess first-hand understanding of their character's reality and make time to prepare them fully for the filming process. I am interested in collaborating with production crew who have various physical abilities and learning what it would be like to make the entire story from a framework of true diverse ability. All of this will require time and creative adaptation to traditional production approaches. It will also require the financial support of an organization with aligned interests. The TELUS Media Fund has a stated interest in stories addressing health and social wellbeing; they might be an encouraging initial connection. Along with the fun and pathos of Mel's adventures in spending her last six orgasms, I want to portray her daily interactions that are not crucial to the central plot but broaden an audience's understanding of how lives are lived. For example, Clark has described that when she goes to the grocery store alone, she often asks other shoppers to reach things for her that are placed on shelves beyond her grasp. These aren't profound exchanges but they illuminate the unofficial daily resources accessed by people with disabilities in order to navigate the world (Clark, What we want from this project, 2018). I am also interested in exploring the idea of "deconstructing cinema" in the way that *This Is The Point* deconstructed the theatrical experience by including stagehands in the middle of a scene, for example to fasten the video camera to Tony's scooter; making technology visible throughout the story; and by sharing commentary with the audience about what went in to crafting an upcoming scenario. An example for the web-series might be to begin the first scene of *Disease & Desire*, which is set in Mel's kitchen, with a real conversation between the actor and the props-handler about which prop is most comfortable for use today. This would reveal that MS symptoms fluctuate and that what worked in rehearsal may or may not be appropriate on the shooting day. The camera could then follow the prop onto the set before the frame settles into place for the scene to begin. In the movement from props table to set, the camera would reveal many of the humans involved in making the show and give an audience a sense of who is included in the story they are consuming. All of this is to say that the idea of redesigning how stories are told, who tells them, and what qualifies as "story" is enticing. The first step is to transcribe Clark's novel into screenplay format so that we can begin to envision what an on-screen version of Mel would be like. The screenplay to follow is a first draft of this process.

4 The screenplay

Sara McIntyre, DRAFT: 2019 March 8.

Adaptation of chapter 2 "Chicken in Mourning" from *A One-Handed Novel* by Kim Clark.

EPISODE 1: Chicken in mourning

Mel stands in her kitchen surrounded by the ingredients for Chicken in Mourning: truffles, carrots, leeks, zucchini, spices, red wine, cutting knife, mandoline, spool of twine, baking pan, recipe book open. She wears a cooking apron; her walking cane hangs on the back of a chair. She leans her weight against the counter while she works.

The wall calendar shows "host grown-up dinner 6pm" scrawled into the box for Friday February 26. Today.

Mel moves to the fridge and retrieves a clean chicken carcass. She closes the fridge and comes face to face with a magnet holding an appointment reminder:

"Annual MS check up. Dr. Sharni. February 26, 2:00 pm".

Confused, she looks over to the calendar, makes the connection.

MEL

Oh Shit.

The time suggestion on the recipe reads "1 hour".

The clock shows 11:00 am.

MEL (CONT'D)

It'll work.

She gets busy with the recipe.

CUT TO:

Mel's movement is slow, deliberate. She pushes the last of the chopped veggies inside the chicken's cavity.

The recipe reads "Moisten your hands under cold running water and loosen the skin on the chicken's breasts and thighs, carefully sliding your hands between the skin and meat."

Mel grins mischievously and turns on the cold-water tap.

CUT TO:

Chicken in Mourning - 2.

Mel slides the truffle slices under the skin of the chicken breast. Slides a slice or two under the skin of each thigh.

She pushes her sleeves up higher and wipes perspiration from her forehead. Hot!

The recipe reads: "Truss the chicken."

Mel picks up the spool of twine. Her fingers extract a length of string and cut it from the spool. She holds the chicken's legs together and binds them. Gently. Lovingly.

Mel's cell phone rings.

MEL (CONT'D)

Not now.

She sees that the call display reads "John".

Mel tries to keep one hand on the chicken's binding, wipes her other on a towel and reaches over to pick up the phone.

MEL (CONT'D)

Hello?

JOHN

Hi, Mel.

MEL

John. What's up?

JOHN

How goes it?

MEL

It goes fine. Why?

The briefest hesitation.

MEL (CONT'D)

Don't tell me you're not coming.

JOHN

Uh, I'm not coming.

MEL

Why the hell not? I've planned everything! You said this was a good day! Seriously. You do this every-

JOHN

Hang on. Let me finish. I can't make it for dinner.

(MORE)

Chicken in Mourning - 3.

JOHN (CONT'D)

But I can get there by about nine.
Is that too late to bother? Should
I just skip it?

MEL

No, just come. Come for dessert.
Char and the hubby are coming and -

JOHN

"The hubby"?

MEL

Sorry, Glen. And Jackie's bringing
her new boyfriend - the one from
the internet dating thing. I think
Cameron's his name. So they're all
coupled up, and I'll be the odd man
out. I need another odd man...
Plus, I've missed you. You're so
busy these days. You know, right?

JOHN

Uh-huh.

MEL

And, inevitably, Jackie will come
up with some anecdote from Maui.

JOHN

Still a sore point?

MEL

No, I'm over it, totally. But you
know what they brought me? One of
those stupid T-shirts that says
"Get Leid." L-e-i-d like the
flowers. And it's extra extra extra
large! You know the -"

JOHN

(laughing)

Mel, Mel! I'll see you at nine.
Wear the shirt.

MEL

Not in this lifetime. Nine at the
latest, yes?

JOHN

At the latest.

Click. He's gone. Mel addresses the chicken.

Chicken in Mourning - 4.

MEL

I wonder how we've been friends for
so long without spoiling it in one
of those sloppy-drunk desperate
moments.

Mel twists the twine up around the chicken's shoulders like a harness. She flips it over and ties a careful knot at the back, cuts the string. Places the bound bird in the pan.
Dissolve to -

MEL'S FANTASY:

The baking pan is a beautiful, mini, silk-lined coffin where the bird rests peacefully on its back. Tanned, entwined in rope, a dusky mantilla trails to its footless ankles.

BACK TO REALTY:

Mel salutes the bird with a swig from the bottle of cooking wine.

MEL (CONT'D)

May your sexy steam reach the gods -
goddesses - in heaven.

The empty bottle joins a fleet of others in the recycling bin under the counter.

INT. MEL'S LIVING ROOM - AN HOUR LATER

Mel is dressed in coat and boots. She walks around slowly to collect keys, turn off lights. Heads for the door.

She's almost at the front door and remembers something.

INT. MEL'S KITCHEN

Mel shakes out a white linen cloth and lays it over the chicken in its pan. She places the covered bird in the fridge.

MEL

Stay cool.

She turns out the light and heads out.

EPISODE 2: Speaking of studies

INT. DOCTOR SHARNI'S EXAMINING ROOM

Mel sits in the chair, DR. SHARNI rifles through pages in a file until he finds what he's looking for. He is tall, angular, has crinkly blue eyes that perfectly match his conservative blue shirt and navy tie.

DR. SHARNI

So, Melanie, you're looking great.
How are things?

MEL

Great, actually... other than the
MS.

DR. SHARNI

Any changes? Eyesight? Cognitive
issues? Brain fog? Balance?

MEL

I've been needing the wheelchair
more often but my brain seems okay.

Dr. Sharni nods and makes notes. Dissolve to -

MEL'S FANTASY:

Mel slips Dr. Sharni's glasses off his face, loosens his tie,
and tears the buttons off his blue shirt with her teeth.

DR. SHARNI

That's good. Let's take a walk
then.

BACK TO REALITY:

Mel listens attentively from the chair.

DR. SHARNI (CONT'D)

Can you do it without the cane?

MEL

Yesterday, no way. Today, maybe.

Dr. Sharni takes her cane from her.

Mel wobbles across the room, drag-lifts her left leg. Dr.
Sharni observes the gait.

DR. SHARNI

Still taking writing classes?

MEL
Nah, the only instructor I liked
left town for Saskatchewan.

DR. SHARNI
Uh, huh. Okay.

Dr. Sharni meets her with her cane before she's halfway back.

MEL
Not as good as I thought.

DR. SHARNI
Do you surf?

MEL
Surfing? I'd love to, Doc. That'd
be a hell of a chapter for my
memoir.

DR. SHARNI
You do have a sense of humour. I
mean couch to wall, counter to
table. Surely, at home you must -

Mel blushes raspberry. She leg-swings and wall-cheats back to
the chair and sits down hard.

MEL
Oh. Furniture surfing. Um, sure, I
guess I do, but only sometimes.
Like a baby learning to walk, isn't
it? But at the opposite end of the
curve, unlearning it.

DR. SHARNI
Okay. Just stand here in front of
the exam table, hands at your side.
No leaning. Now close your eyes.

Mel does as she's told. Her eyes remain shut... and her body
tilts backwards towards Dr. Sharni's waiting arms. Like the
trust-fall game. Dr. Sharni catches her and Mel's eyes fly
open. She's afraid.

MEL
I didn't feel anything.

DR. SHARNI
Proprioception. Lack of.

He motions her up onto the table. Mel slips off her shoes and
Dr. Sharni swings her legs up. The exam continues.

Dr. Sharni strokes her cheeks.

DR. SHARNI (CONT'D)
How's the sensation here? Here?
Anything different?"

Dissolve to -

MEL'S FANTASY:

Mel draws his fingers into her mouth with her tongue.

DR. SHARNI (CONT'D)
Trouble swallowing?

BACK TO REALITY:

Mel clears her throat.

MEL
Swallowing's just fine.

DR. SHARNI
Cover one eye. Follow my finger.

Mel does. Dr. Sharni moves his finger across her vision and up and down.

MEL
Feels normal.

DR. SHARNI
Slight nystagmus. Now, hold your
right arm up, here. Out toward my
shoulder.

Mel hears music swell: The Blue Danube waltz.

DR. SHARNI (CONT'D)
Close your eyes. Okay, touch your
nose with your finger.

Mel's right hand has no problem with this.

DR. SHARNI (CONT'D)
Left side.

Mel's left hand hesitates erratically on its way to her
cheek. The music screeches to a halt.

MEL
Damn proprioception.

CUT TO:

Dr. Sharni tests her reflexes by tapping each of her elbows and knees with a rubber hammer. The left knee causes her left leg to fling up towards his nuts. He jumps back skillfully.

MEL (CONT'D)

Sorry!

Dr. Sharni laughs.

CUT TO:

Mel lies on the examining table and Dr. Sharni runs his key up the bottom of each foot, heel to toe. Her feet curl and splay in opposite directions.

CUT TO:

Mel sits on the table, Dr. Sharni pokes her extremities repeatedly with a long pin. Mel responds with "sharp" or "pressure". Sometimes she doesn't feel anything and waits until he pokes a different spot.

DR. SHARNI

There is a bit of improvement,
actually.

He adds notes to her file.

MEL

Enough to slide me down the scale?

DR. SHARNI

No. Sorry. Your upper strength,
your resistance, is improved but
your reliance on the cane bumps you
up to a six. You need to be able to
walk 100 meters without assistance.

MEL

I can try it again.

He pats her shoulder.

DR. SHARNI

You've likely done more than enough
for today.

MEL

But that puts me closer to ten than
zero. Closer to death by MS than
symptom-free.

DR. SHARNI
Death by MS is a very rare
occurrence. Have you felt depressed
lately?

MEL
I'm not afraid of dying. And I'm
not scared of living either. It's
the chunk in between.

DR. SHARNI
Yes, well...

MEL
The complications...

DR. SHARNI
Let's not jump the gun.

MEL
Oh, I won't be needing a gun. But I
am planning a Wild West theme. A
hero with a hypodermic holster and
a couple of pill-bottle bandoliers
slung across their chest.

Dissolve to -

MEL'S FANTASY:

Dr. Sharni continues the exam in western fetish gear.

MEL (V.O.)
A big old Stetson. And -

DR. SHARNI
Melanie -

MEL (V.O.)
Chaps! You can do chaps, right? And
a bottle of whiskey, Canadian of
course, hanging from the IV pole
and maybe -

DR. SHARNI
Listen, Melanie -

BACK TO REALITY:

Dr. Sharni is still in his white doctor coat.

MEL
Oh, c'mon, Doc. It's a long way
off. Let a girl dream.

DR. SHARNI

Things aren't bad overall. There is one other thing we should talk about.

MEL

Something new? What about scorpion venom? I heard it's hot in Hong Kong. It might be more fun than the bee sting therapy.

DR. SHARNI

There's really nothing new, nothing that's proven, but I'll let you know if anything promising comes up. There are always studies.

MEL

But I'm already at a six.

DR. SHARNI

Speaking of studies, we got the results back from the Sexual Neuro-Response study. Do you still want to know how it went?

MEL

Sure.

She's suddenly suspicious.

MEL (CONT'D)

Is there something I should know?

DR. SHARNI

Nothing life-threatening. But the data collected from you does show that you have a diminished number of orgasms before your sensory nerves will stop responding. According to your file you've had a pretty inactive libido for quite some time, since the onset. It's common with MS.

He takes this seriously. Mel keeps a straight face while she digests this for all of ten seconds.

MEL

You had me worried for a minute. How can they make a scientific prediction like that?

DR. SHARNI

They've been most successful in their estimations.

MEL

So what's my magic number? A hundred?

DR. SHARNI

The number they've given you is six. You have six orgasms. The research, the technology... It's amazing really.

MEL

Right. Amazing.

What's the appropriate response here?

MEL (CONT'D)

Now we just need something equally amazing to get rid of the MS.

She puts her shoes back on.

MEL (CONT'D)

Six, you say? Absolutely six?

DR. SHARNI

They've been very accurate.

MEL

Is it treatable?

DR. SHARNI

There's nothing to date. Do you want to speak with our psychologist? I think you've met with her before. We could line up an appointment.

MEL

I don't need to see Truth Ruth. I'm fine. Really. It's just weird, two sixes in the same day. Maybe it's a sign.

DR. SHARNI

Just coincidence.

He gets up from his chair.

MEL
Anyway, I'm relieved it's nothing
worse. And the cane, well, I'm
almost used to it.

DR. SHARNI
You manage just fine with it.

Dr. Sharni sees her to the door, rests his hand on shoulder.

DR. SHARNI (CONT'D)
Keep in touch, Melanie. See you
next year.

MEL
Thanks.

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE DR. SHARNI'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

The door slams behind her. Mel's brow furrows.

MEL
Touch.

She walks down the hallway.

MEL (CONT'D)
Six?

EPISODE 3: Wallpaper

INT. MEL'S APARTMENT - SAME DAY

Mel enters carrying a paper-bagged bottle of wine. She opens the bathroom door and partially extricates the wheelchair, hesitates, and then leaves it half in the doorway.

INT. MEL'S KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Mel puts the wine down on the kitchen table, fetches a glass, then candles. She parks her cane against the table and sinks into a chair.

Exhaustion.

She gazes around to where the dining table is set for six. Groans.

She extracts her cell phone and starts to dial. Pauses to think.

MEL

Fuck it.

She puts the phone down beside her and rests her head against the back of the chair.

Mel's vision blurs as she surrenders to a fantasy. Dissolve to -

INT. MEL'S DINING ROOM, FANTASY

The dining room walls are covered in wall-paper showing life-sized silhouettes of elegant socialites at a party; some solo, some in random groupings. We hear the gentle chatter and clinking glasses of a cocktail party.

Mel sits at the head of the dining room table, dressed in black velvet and lace. The table is seated with live guests in Gothic outfits who eat, drink and smoke sensuously. Mel's apartment now holds a full Goth costume party.

ABATTOIR with black star nipples leans in to light her cigarette on the flame from a 10-inch Zippo lighter. At the other end of the zippo, MASH watches her hungrily.

On the couch a couple of KISS IMPOSTERS make out. Their face paint has melted away from around their mouths.

Next to them on the couch a SHADOW PUPPETEER casts dancing shadow figures against the back wall using candlelight.

Mel raises her martini glass to toast the sexy light show.

ACOLYTE kneels down in front of Mel and slips her foot out of her slipper. He rubs her foot hungrily and then leans down to kiss it, his head disappearing below the table.

Mel sighs with pleasure.

- Something else can happen in this scene that contrasts with what's ahead. An orgasm from foot stimulation? -

BACK TO REALITY:

INT. MEL'S DINING ROOM, PRESENT

Mel is on her couch, alone, cradling the wine glass.

MEL
All mine.

She notices the clock reads 5:00 pm.

MEL (CONT'D)
Shit. Six.

EPISODE 4: Sixty six

INT. MEL'S KITCHEN

Mel opens the fridge and pulls out the pan of Chicken in Mourning. She coos to it.

MEL
Six is just a number.

As she moves around preparing for the party, she encounters 6 everywhere.

The news is on channel 6.

The recipe is on page 6.

The calendar reminds her it's February 26.

She pulls 6 chairs around the dining room table.

The clock reads 5:16 as the DOORBELL RINGS.

We hear keys jingling in the lock.

MEL (CONT'D)
Come on in!

JACKIE (O.S.)
It's just us, Mel.

MEL
(to herself)
Us? Cameron.

Mel stands in her kitchen as JACKIE bustles in, followed by an ATTRACTIVE MAN.

MEL (CONT'D)
Jackie. You're finally here.

Jackie unloads food and wine bottles from the man's arms and takes over the space. Mel bristles just a little at the intrusion. Then turns her attention to the man. She takes him in, finds her manners.

MEL (CONT'D)
I guess you've figured out I'm
Melanie, Mel if you like. You must
be Cameron.

She smiles, balances against the counter and reaches out to shake his hand.

MARVIN
Actually, I'm Marvin. Thanks for
having me over.

MARVIN takes her hand.

MEL
Sorry, Marvin. Of course! My
mistake.

Jackie laughs to herself.

JACKIE
Oh, Mel.

Jackie hangs up their coats, smooths her already tidy hair
and rolls up her sleeves.

MARVIN
Now, what can we do?

Mel acquiesces, points to the bird.

MEL
Well, I haven't made it as far as
the oven with her. Three seventy-
five, if you would, Jack. And,
Marvin, could you pour some wine?
The bottle's by the couch. Unless
you'd prefer something else. Beer's
in the fridge. Glasses are here.

She points in the general direction of the cupboards. Marvin
is relaxed, curious, as though he expected something worse.
He gets to work on the booze.

Mel does her best to follow Jackie who moves around the
kitchen.

MEL (CONT'D)
(sotto voce)
Who is this Marvin? What happened
to Cameron?

JACKIE
Why are you calling our dinner
"she"? Charlene won't like that.

MEL
The recipe is called Chicken in
Mourning. Char won't eat it anyway.

Jackie lifts the cloth from the bird and Marvin looks over
her shoulder.

MARVIN
Did you tie that?

Mel nods affirmation.

MARVIN (CONT'D)
That's really good. Have you
studied Shibari?

Mel raises an eyebrow.

Marvin tops up Mel's glass, and before she can reply she notices his left hand. There are two thumbs on it. In opposition. The knuckle of the shapely outer thumb bends just around the bottom of the glass's tall-stemmed base. The other, the inner thumb, stretches high, almost to the rim, and in-between, Marvin's fingers cup her wine.

MEL
Uh.

Mel tries not to stare at Marvin's sixty hand, but her vision blurs. Dissolve to -

MEL'S FANTASY:

The two thumbs of Marvin's left hand stretch their full length to embrace both of Mel's nipples. And then slide down her belly toward...

MEL (CONT'D)
You're with Jackie? But we have
numerical synchronicity.

MARVIN
Write about it.

MEL
Shut up.

MARVIN
Pardon?

CRASH BACK TO:

INT. MEL'S KITCHEN, PRESENT

Marvin still holds Mel's wine glass out, waiting for her to take it. Jackie stares over at her. Mel is flustered, not sure what was said out loud. She pushes the glass away.

MEL
I've decided to just do it.

MARVIN

Pardon?

MEL

I'm going to Climax!

Jackie snorts, sprays wine out her nose.

The doorbell rings.

Marvin strides off toward the sound, still holding Mel's wine.

Jackie grabs a swath of paper towel for her running mascara. Mel leans against the counter, tries to get her bearings.

CHARLENE swooshes in, draped in elegant eco-friendly hemp, carrying a covered tray. Marvin follows, still holding Mel's wine.

CHARLENE

Aloha, lovely friends. I would have let myself in but I had my hands full.

Her crystals tinkle as she slides the tray onto the counter. She eyes Marvin.

CHARLENE (CONT'D)

Now, who's this fine being with the fiery aura?

MARVIN

Marvin.

He hands Mel her wine and grasps Char's hand.

MARVIN (CONT'D)

Aloha.

MEL

Marvin, this is Char. Where's your better half? Glen parking the car?

CHARLENE

He stayed home with the girls. Sorry. The sitter cancelled. Strep throat or something... and you know how they get when they're left alone, poor babies.

Marvin shakes his head with sympathy.

MARVIN
Kids, eh.

JACKIE
Dogs.

MEL
Schnauzers.

Jackie sniffs.

MARVIN
You okay over there?

CHAR
You're not sick, too, are you,
Jackie? I have some turmeric
lozenges in my bag. Hun, you look
positively -

JACKIE
Not sick. I was laughing at Mel's
joke.

CHAR
Oh, do share.

MEL
That was no joke. I'm dead serious.
What I said was -

CHARLENE
John's not here. Is he coming? I
had the strangest dream about him
last -

MEL
He's coming later. I'm going to
Climax. It's suddenly crucial that
I do this.

She looks around at their wide eyes.

CHARLENE
How... enlightened of you.

MARVIN
Would you like a hand with that?

JACKIE
Mel, are you losing it or what?

MEL

That's what I'm trying to do. Not
lose it! In Climax. Climax,
Saskatchewan. I'm going to a
writer's retreat.

A moment of stunned silence while everyone's brains catch up.

INT. MEL'S DINING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Marvin guides her over to the dining room table and sits her down. She is grateful. Char and Jackie drift after them.

Marvin raises his wine glass to toast - but can't think of what to say.

MEL

To the end of last year. That's the reason I planned this whole dinner thing.

They tilt their glasses back - and look for more reasons to continue tilting.

MARVIN

Anything else?

CHARLENE

Positivity!

Char gives Jackie a nudge.

CHARLENE (CONT'D)

And...

JACKIE

Support. But -

Mel cuts her off.

MEL

To long-time friends. And, Marvin, to you. Welcome to our little club.

MARVIN

You're sure I'm...

MEL

Of course! And let's drink to drink. And to fabulous food.

They do.

JACKIE

The food!

Jackie jumps up and heads back into the kitchen. Char follows.

Marvin settles into a chair next to Mel at the table. They clink glasses.

MEL

So, Marvin, how long have you known Jackie?

Jackie calls out -

JACKIE

We met at Cam's video store a couple of months ago. It's the one down on Nichol Street.

MEL

So... you know Cameron?

MARVIN

That's how I met Jackie.

MEL

Now I'm confused. Are you both...?

MARVIN

Dating Jackie?

Marvin's soft laughter is charming.

MARVIN (CONT'D)

No. Cam couldn't make it. And I just happened to overhear. So Jackie said why didn't I come along for dinner then.

MEL

So you're not with Jackie?

Charlene, all ears, hovers near them.

MEL (CONT'D)

What?

CHARLENE

Oh, just... where's the butter?

MEL

Ask Jackie.

Mel frowns Charlene back into the kitchen. Marvin doesn't miss a beat.

MARVIN

I'm most definitely not with Jackie. But when she said she had a fascinating friend...

MEL
Fascinating? Jackie said that?

MARVIN
She also said this friend didn't appreciate her meddling...

MEL
Or matchmaking, blind dates, general interference...

MARVIN
And that this fascinating friend wouldn't hesitate to kill Jackie for setting something like this up...

Marvin opens his hand. It's an invitation.

Jackie moseys over with an empty breadbasket. She can't seem to find the perfect position for it.

MEL
Problem?

JACKIE
Oh no.

Jackie brushes at invisible crumbs.

JACKIE (CONT'D)
Not really. I just, uh... where's your butter?

MEL
Ask Char.

Mel waits for her to leave, then turns back to Marvin.

MEL (CONT'D)
So, here you are. And I'm very glad. To meet you. To have you. Here, I mean.

MARVIN
She did not, however, mention you're a writer. What are you working on?

MEL
A book, a novel I think. Maybe erotica.

(MORE)

MEL (CONT'D)

But I need a few more adventures
for the collection before I have to
live through the page.

Marvin grins.

MARVIN

I'd be happy to help with that. Act
out scenes with you.

Mel grins back.

MEL

You know you have the most
beautiful, uh, thumbs, er, hands.
Hand. You have two thumbs on your
left hand, which is really quite...
unusual.

Marvin smiles.

MARVIN

They come in handy.

MEL

I think we need another toast,
Marvin. To an optimistic number. To
the number six.

She brushes her hand against his, then holds it there,
mesmerized by the heat of it. The beauty, the curl of the
fingers, the glistening hairs on the back of his skin.

She notices him watching her, retracts her hand slowly.

MEL (CONT'D)

I didn't mean to embarrass you. I
just think you have a lovely
hand... I mean hands...

He leaves his sixty hand resting near her glass.

MARVIN

It's okay. Really. We're all
flattered.

She takes her eyes off Marvin's thumbs to study his face. Not
bad at all. Better by the minute. There's a gloss on his
forehead. Fullish lips. Eyes deep and dark...

MEL

Excuse me, Marvin, there's
something I have to do.

Mel counter-surfs into the kitchen where she scribbles "6" on a turquoise Post-it note. She squeezes past Jackie and Char at the sink, opens the oven door and shoves the crumpled paper between the chicken's curvaceously plump legs.

Then she texts John: "Don't come. Too late. Sorry. Headache. Early bed."

EPISODE 6: Altruism

INT. MEL'S KITCHEN

Jackie and Char bustle around with dinner preparations. Mel approves of their progress.

JACKIE
Smells delicious.

MEL
Thanks, Jack.

Mel gives Jackie a quick hug and then heads back to the table where Marvin is.

INT. MEL'S DINING ROOM

Marvin waits for her at the table.

MARVIN
How about a little scene study? I bet we have time to at least improvise some characters before dinner's ready.

MEL
Now?

She realizes - why not?

MEL (CONT'D)
What do you know about carpentry?

Marvin didn't expect this -

MEL (CONT'D)
The pole in my bathroom might be coming loose. Are you any good with power tools?

MARVIN
You have a stripper pole in your bathroom?

MEL
More like a support pole.

MARVIN
I can play a carpenter. Will this be a chapter in your book?

Mel grins at him and starts to get up from the table.

MEL
Have you got a condom, Charmin'
Marvin?

MARVIN
For my thumbs?

MEL
No. I want everything.

MARVIN
My special thumb is everything, my
everything. It's my tool, my organ,
the quintessential me.

Marvin offers his arm for Mel to support herself.

MEL
But you do have a cock, right?
She looks down toward his crotch to confirm.

MARVIN
This thumb.

He holds up the extra digit.

MARVIN (CONT'D)
This thumb is the best way, the
only way, for me to...

Mel isn't so sure.

MARVIN (CONT'D)
It won't disappoint. I promise.

She considers the possibilities.

MEL
Okay, the thumb it is. But stay
close. I want your whole body. And
lips. I want your lips.

They make their way toward the bathroom...

MARVIN
You should take me and my lips and
my thumbs to Climax with you.

...and close the door.

INT. MEL'S KITCHEN

Jackie and Char continue dinner preparations. At some point they notice Mel and Marvin are gone.

JACKIE
How can she afford truffles?

CHAR
How can she afford Climax?

JACKIE
This one's on me.

CHAR
You're paying for the writer's retreat?

JACKIE
Oh. No.

Jackie smiles to herself.

JACKIE (CONT'D)
... The repair man.

Char doesn't quite follow.

JACKIE (CONT'D)
Marvin. I hired him for the evening.

CHAR
He's a plumber?

JACKIE
He's plumbing her.

Char catches on.

CHAR
Wait, he's a ...?

Jackie nods.

They hear muffled moaning from inside the bathroom. Both start giggling.

CHAR (CONT'D)
Oh Jack. Does she know?

JACKIE
God no, she'd kill me.

They ponder that.

JACKIE (CONT'D)

She never needs to know, will just think he fancies her. I won a little at the casino this afternoon. Thought I'd do something nice for her.

CHAR

Is that legal?

JACKIE

Uh, it is in Switzerland. They have volunteers there for people like...

She tilts her head toward the bathroom.

CHAR

People like...?

JACKIE

People like Mel... People with... problems. People that are...

CHAR

Don't say it.

JACKIE

...handicapped.

CHAR

Disabled.

JACKIE

Okay, disabled. Crippled. Messed up.

CHAR

She's always been messed up. You know what she calls us? Temporarily abled.

JACKIE

Really?

CHAR

Think about it. Perfect health has no guarantee. You wake up one day and boom, something's lost.

JACKIE

Or you gradually lose your shit. Which is worse?

The two women imagine their abilities being temporary. They both reach for their wine, drink.

CHAR
Volunteers. Just for sex?
Really?

JACKIE
Really.

CHAR
Sex *is* beneficial, I mean health-
wise.

JACKIE
If it's good sex.

CHAR
It helps your immune system.

JACKIE
Headaches... and cramps.

CHAR
Keeps you looking young.

JACKIE
Curbs your appetite and boosts your
testosterone.

CHAR
Helps you sleep.

JACKIE
And it feels good.

CHAR (CONT'D)
And it feels good.

CHAR (CONT'D)
Mel needs all that stuff.

JACKIE
He said he's got other clients with
her...

CHAR
...situation.

JACKIE
I think of Marvin as a paid
volunteer with an altruistic
mission. To give Mel an endorphin
boost. A-n-d... to remind her she's
still got it... you know... going
on.

CHAR
She's still attractive... despite
her...

JACKIE
...situation.

CHAR
She has been pretty down.

JACKIE
She's hard on herself.

CHAR
MS is hard.

JACKIE
It's going to get harder.

They look toward the bathroom. Jackie calls out -

JACKIE (CONT'D)
Mel, you okay in there?

CHAR
Marvin, you okay?

Mel's frenzied voice replies -

MEL (O.S.)
Uh... yeah... out in a minute!

The stove timer goes off. Char and Jackie burst out laughing.

EPISODE 7: Sixty five

INT. BATHROOM

Mel sits on the floor supported by Marvin's body cradling hers from behind. Her pants are off and her shirt is partially unbuttoned. Marvin's sixty hand works between her legs, his other hand massages a breast, and his lips stay close to her ear.

MEL
Oh God you're good.

MARVIN
Take me to Climax with you.

Mel's breathing deepens.

MEL
Slower... slower. What?

MARVIN
To Climax.

MEL
Almost... almost there. Wait, make it last. I want to stay right here on the periphery until...

MARVIN
I want to go with you to Climax.

MEL
Can you catch up?

MARVIN
I mean to Saskatchewan. I've got time in my schedule...

MEL
What? No. No! That's mine. I just met you. And you're not even a writer. It's a writers' retreat!

MARVIN
I might be.

Mel is losing track of what's going on. She holds perfectly still to regain her thoughts. Then has a terrible realization.

MARVIN (CONT'D)
What's the matter?

Mel lifts his sixty hand away from her.

MARVIN (CONT'D)
Do you want something different?

MEL
This isn't six.

MARVIN
Are you using numerology or something?

MEL
It's complicated. I've sort of been given this number. I know it sounds crazy... and I thought... that my number was six. But I've been responding all wrong... to the wrong... to the wrong fucking number. What I really need is a five. It's all wrong, Marvin. This is all wrong.

She keeps her eyes on Marvin's hand resting on her thigh.

Marvin is thoughtful, then lifts his right hand from her breast and spreads out the thumb and fingers.

MARVIN
Like this?

Genius.

MEL
That's it! Five. Can you say it for me, Marvin? Give it some, I don't know... cachet?

Marvin whispers into the nape of her neck.

MARVIN
Five.

MEL
And no more talk of Saskatchewan.

MARVIN
Okay.

His right hand slides between her legs.

MEL
Say five again, Marvin. Say it five times. Humour me.

Mel leans back against him.

MARVIN

Five. Five. Five. Five. Five.

Her eyes close. Sink. Cinque. Sunk.

INT. KITCHEN - SIMULTANEOUSLY

Jackie takes the chicken out of the oven, admires it.

JACKIE

This really is beautiful. It's kind of got a veil.

CHAR

Ew. A dark veil. Like a noir bride.

JACKIE

She calls it *Chicken in Mourning*.

CHAR

A scared sad noir bride.

JACKIE

Mel's married to MS now. Feck.

The sound of Mel's climax floats out from the bathroom. Char and Jackie grin and toast each other with their wine glasses.

CHAR

Did you ask her about her appointment?

JACKIE

No, she wouldn't let me help. Did you?

CHAR

Not a good time.

JACKIE

She doesn't like to talk about it.

CHAR

Nobody does. Refill?

JACKIE

Well, she's cheating on MS for tonight. Yes, top me up.

CHAR
That's a good wedding gift,
actually.

Char pours wine. They both re-examine the chicken. Char notices something between the bird's legs.

CHAR (CONT'D)
What is that? There.

JACKIE
I don't know.

Jackie pulls a crumpled, singed ball of paper from the chicken's cavity. She tosses it onto the table gingerly.

INT. BATHROOM

Mel rests against Marvin's chest while she catches her breath. The reality of what she's just done overcomes her and she sits up straight to clear her thoughts. She closes her eyes to think, and she falls hard back against Marvin's chest.

MARVIN
Oof. You okay?

Mel's eyes fly open and she realizes what happened.

MEL
Shit. Sorry.

MARVIN
Proprioception.

MEL
Yeah.

They both sit in that knowledge.

MEL (CONT'D)
Wait. How come you know about that?

MARVIN
Uh, I have... I know... Other MS -

MEL
Lovers?

MARVIN
Sure.

MEL

Is this a fetish for you? Did Jackie bring you here 'cause she thought you'd get off with a crip?

The heightened emotion causes Mel's legs to stiffen.

MARVIN

Whoa, no! Don't say that. You're fantastic, I would have flirted with you even if ...

MEL

If what?

She breathes deeply to try and stop the stiffening but Marvin feels her tension.

He maneuvers her to the floor, places a towel-pillow under her head and covers her legs with another towel.

MEL (CONT'D)

You've done this before.

Her body stiffens into a plank. Marvin strokes her hand, stays calm.

MARVIN

Okay, look. Jackie hired me for this evening. She swore me to secrecy but you deserve to know what's real.

MEL

You're a care-worker? Isn't sex with clients considered unethical?

MARVIN

I'm a sex coach. I specialize in clients with physical diversities.

Mel lets that sink in.

MEL

Does Jackie know that's what you do? I mean, your clients?

MARVIN

I think she thinks she gets it. She called my agency, so she looked into the service. We don't usually agree to the secret-surprise thing, though. It's a little unethical.

MEL

My doctor told me today that I only have six orgasms left. Then my sexual neuro-response system shuts down. I thought you were going to be number six - and it was perfect 'cause of your -

Marvin holds up his six-fingered hand.

MEL (CONT'D)

- right. But I was feeling good yesterday morning and so I used up one of them then.

MARVIN

So I was your Five.

MEL

That means I've now only got four left.

MARVIN

Wow, that's heavy.

They sit in silence for a moment. Marvin absentmindedly massages her legs.

MEL

Touch.

He smiles.

MARVIN

How're you doing?

MEL

I think my body's back. Can you help me get dressed?

Marvin pulls her shirt straight for her and does up the buttons.

MARVIN

She thought she was doing a good thing.

MEL

Yeah, she always does.

Marvin helps her sit up against the tub.

MARVIN

Well... It's been an honour to meet
you Mel.

She grins at him. He tucks his business card into her shirt
pocket.

MEL

And you, Marvin. And your sixty
hands.

EPISODE 8: Real talk

INT. MEL'S DINING ROOM - LATER

Mel, Jackie and Char share the meal. Char doesn't partake of the chicken but Mel and Jackie savour the bird and her trimmings.

CHAR

When's the workshop? In Climax.

MEL

Next month. It's a two-day road trip.

JACKIE

Drive? But your legs just froze up. What if that happens again while you're behind the wheel?

CHAR

Maybe Marvin should accompany you. He seemed pretty comfortable with your... physical... stuff...

MEL

No. I don't need Charmin' Marvin as my chauffeur. Also I don't think I could afford him.

Jackie laughs uncomfortably.

MEL (CONT'D)

Although it turns out he was just the man for the job this evening.

Char giggles.

JACKIE

Good. I'm glad you enjoyed him.

CHAR

How was his hand? The weird one?

MEL

It was fantastic. I'm sure he lists it as a special skill. Does he Jackie?

CHAR

Maybe I'll call him... uh, are you going to see him again?

MEL

I don't know.

(to Jackie)

I'm curious how you learned about what he does for a living. He must be a regular at the video store.

JACKIE

Yeah, he's in at least once a week. I don't know, Cam chats with people... he's very sociable with the customers.

MEL

So you learned that Marvin has experience with disabled clients?

JACKIE

Clients? Is he a therapist?

MEL

How did you convince him to join us for this evening's festivities?

JACKIE

I asked if he'd like to meet some new friends and he said Yes. What are you getting at?

CHAR

He had great energy. He's well suited for people-focused, supportive types of work. I sensed it right away.

MEL

Jack, you hired him.

Jackie can't get out of this one.

MEL (CONT'D)

You hired an escort. To be my date. To fuck me.

JACKIE

He has experience with - people with hand- disabilities. I thought it would boost...

MEL

Am I that unattractive? That undesirable? You think I'm unfuckable without payment?!

She looks from one to the other of them.

CHAR

I want you to know I had nothing to do with any of this.

JACKIE

Well, shit, Mel... I just thought a little fresh meat... Marvin might give you a lift, a boost, a... you know... something to de-funk you.

CHAR

We *should* be able to pay for what we want. Men have been doing it for eons.

JACKIE

Exactly! To enjoy yourself, especially while you still can.

CHAR

Seize the day!

MEL

If *I* decide that's what *I* want, that would be different. But you took it upon yourself to "solve a problem" that has nothing to do with you.

Jackie finally gets it.

JACKIE

Shit Mel, I'm sorry. I really am. I had good intentions. I didn't mean to...

MEL

Belittle, disempower, discount...

JACKIE

Yeah, that...

MEL

Dupe, trick, wham-bam-boozle...

JACKIE

I'm sorry. For all of that. Kinda backfired.

MEL

Kinda.

She lets Jackie sit in the discomfort for a moment.

MEL (CONT'D)
Aw, forget it. Being pissed off
takes too much energy.

JACKIE
I'm sorry.

Char gets up and begins to clear things to the kitchen.

MEL
And there were perks. Well, one
perk.

CHAR
So perk up, lady.

MEL
He did have a nice touch. Those
thumbs...

JACKIE
He still owes you a couple of
hours...

MEL
I think not.

JACKIE
Okay.

JACK
Let's put this chicken to bed.

MEL
Yeah, chicken has mourned.

Jackie stands up and begins clearing things from the table
too. Mel lets her friends do the work.

JACKIE
I'll do better next time.

MEL
Sure. Yeah.

JACKIE
What else can I do? How can I help?

MEL
Just leave it. Leave everything.
Cam's probably waiting for you,
right?

JACKIE
I'll pick him up after work.
Surprise him.

MEL
Maybe skip the surprise factor.

JACKIE
Noted. Help you into bed?

MEL
No. I'm feelin' better now. Go
already.

Char comes in from the kitchen with a dish cloth and tosses
the crumpled paper ball to Mel.

CHAR
Whatever this is, it's grossing me
out.

MEL
Supposed to be magic.

Mel rolls the ball in her hands and almost puts it down - but
resignedly opens it. A large number 4 has replaced the number
6.

Go figure.

JACKIE
Okay, I'm going to head out. Don't
stay up too late talking without
me.

CHAR
Everything's almost tidied. I'm
right behind you.

Mel gets up to see her off. Jackie hugs them both.

JACKIE
Call me if you need me. Got your
panic-button handy?

MEL
No worries. "I've fallen and I
can't get up" is right here.

Mel pats the pendant under her shirt.

JACKIE
Are you gonna call Marvin?

MEL

I'll think about it. Go!

Jackie heads out the door.

CHAR

You're not unfuckable.

MEL

No. But a little fucked.

Char heads back towards the kitchen. Mel considers Marvin's business card. She shakes her head.

INT. MEL'S KITCHEN - LATER

Mel sits alone at the clean table with a glass of wine and four candles burning in front of her. The singed teal post-it showing "4" lies on the table. Her cell phone rings.

DELHI PATRICK

Madam, hello. My name is Patrick.
Are you interested on this
particularly fine day to purchase—

MEL

Hello Patrick. But of course -

Conversation with telemarketer, DELHI PATRICK, where Mel discusses the magic of 4 and travel plans for Saskatchewan.

Glossary

DIEGETIC SOUND: Sound whose source is visible on the screen or whose source is implied to be present by the action of the film, i.e. voices of characters; sounds made by objects in the story; music represented as coming from instruments in the story space.

DIRECTOR: The director is responsible for what is seen and heard on film, and everything inside the frame. She is also in charge on the set. (Combs, et al., 2017)

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY (DoP) or CINEMATOGRAPHER: The DOP (DP on American sets) translates the director's vision onto film/video by choosing lenses, camera moves and lighting, and collaborating on the composition of the frame.

NON-DIEGETIC SOUND: Sound whose source is neither visible on the screen nor has been implied to be present in the action, i.e. narrator's commentary; sound effects that are added for dramatic effect; mood music.

PLOT: The sequence of action in a story.

SCENE: Scenes in a film are the building blocks of sequences, which make up the entire film. They can be compared to sentences which make up paragraphs that create an entire story. Each scene is related to the other so they will communicate the desired effect to the audience. (Johnson & Bone, 1976)

SUBPLOT: A subplot receives less emphasis and screen time than a Central Plot. Subplots add dimension to characters, create comic or romantic relief from tensions or violence of the Central Plot, but their primary purpose is to make life more difficult for the protagonist. (McKee, 1997)

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Appendix

4.1 Mediaversity “How We Grade”

www.mediaversityreviews.com/how-we-grade

The Mediaversity grade does NOT just reflect the technical aspects of a show or film. Cinematography, writing, soundtrack, editing? That’s what every other review site is for. Instead, the Mediaversity grade reflects how inclusive a program is and should be used as a tool to view media within its broader social context. In fact, a program can be critically acclaimed but if it isn’t inclusive, it will score low at Mediaversity. And if that bothers you, you’re probably in the wrong place.

Our scoring system prioritizes intersectionality. While deep, social impact for narrow groups is crucial in the ongoing fight for onscreen representation, culture blogs are already fantastic sources for those types of discussions. Instead, Mediaversity takes the macro view and measures how well a TV show or film presents different and overlapping identities.

THE CONTEXT

To give context, we list the gender, ethnicity, nationality, and LGBTQ status of show/film creators and reviewers alike.

👩 = Female

🧑 = Non-binary or Agender

👨 = Male

👤 = Black

👤 = Latinx, South Asian, Native, Mixed, or MENA [Middle East and North Africa]

👤 = East Asian

👤 = White

🏳️ = LGBTQ (publicly)

THE GRADE

To assign a grade, we add up the category scores, add or deduct bonus points if applicable, then divide by the number of categories – 4 for TV shows, 3 for films. No grade inflation here; a C is average, a B is good, and As are only for the outstanding.

A+ (5.0) — This some woke shit.

A (4.70 - 4.99) — Inclusive AF and damned well-made.

A- (4.50 - 4.69) — Inclusive AF.

B+ (4.20 - 4.49) — Nailed it, just maybe not in all categories.

B (4.00 - 4.19) — Great job, just maybe not in all categories.

B- (3.60 - 3.99) — All we ask is that you try, and try you did.

C+ (3.40 - 3.59) — Chilling in that inoffensive groove.

C (3.20 - 3.39) — Diversity was not a priority.

C- (2.60 - 3.19) — I spy missteps.

D (2.00 - 2.59) — These creators don't see race.

F (1.00 - 1.99) — How was this greenlit?

Read on to see how we score each category.

TECHNICAL

A 3/5 in Technical means a show or film was enjoyable, if forgettable. This category reflects traditional metrics such as character development, dialogue, soundtrack, cinematography, and so on.

We include technical merit into the Mediaversity score because complex characters, fresh narratives, and compelling art direction are inextricable from diverse storytelling. You can't be super diverse if all your characters are flat, and you can't be strong on technical merit if your casting is tone-deaf or retreading old territory.

GENDER

A 3/5 in Gender means female characters were written respectfully but still had unequal screen time and/or complexity in comparison to the male characters.

Questions we consider when scoring:

- Are there at least two female characters who have a conversation that isn't about men? (Also known as the Bechdel Test.)
- NUMBERS - Are women featured equally to men in terms of screen and speaking time?
- DEPTH - Are they represented as nuanced, three-dimensional characters?
- POSITIVITY - Do they fall into any stereotypes or tropes?

RACE

A 3/5 in Race means people of color were written respectfully, but their characters were less complex than the white characters or were underrepresented.

Questions we consider when scoring:

- NUMBERS - Are different ethnic groups represented proportionately to their real-world setting?
- DEPTH - Are characters of color written as nuanced, three-dimensional characters?
- POSITIVITY - Do they fall into any stereotypes or tropes?

LGBTQ

This category is scored for TV shows only. For films that cover LGBTQ themes, we factor in inclusiveness through Bonus Points or Deductions.

For TV, a 3/5 in LGBTQ means the culture was treated respectfully. No TV show can score higher than a 3.5/5 without the inclusion of an actual LGBTQ character.

Questions we consider when scoring:

- NUMBERS - Are LGBTQ characters represented proportionately to their real-world setting (at least 1 in every 25 characters)?
- DEPTH - Are LGBTQ characters written as nuanced, three-dimensional characters?
- POSITIVITY - Do they fall into any stereotypes or tropes?

BONUS POINTS/DEDUCTIONS

Any media that sheds light on an underrepresented group will score points at Mediaversity, especially if they have suffered from onscreen marginalizing in the past. On the flipside, stereotypes will get deductions.

Themes that may score bonus points or deductions include representation of disability, seniors, religion, or body diversity.