

By SAMUEL LURIE

It's always difficult to acclimate back to the "real" world after being immersed in queer space. The straight world always seems off kilter somehow. But when my partner and I braved the San Francisco Airport after spending a long weekend at a queer conference in Fog City, the culture shock wasn't just about the hectic, hetero energy of middle America. We were struck by the bodies themselves. All the people bustling around that airport seemed to have two arms and two legs. They were walking without any distinctive gait, and without crutches or canes. No shiny wheelchairs zoomed by, no one had a service dog, alert and working, lying at their feet. Simply put, because of where we'd been and where we were coming from, all these people looked, well, abnormal.

The queerness we had emerged from was the first ever Queerness and Disability Conference, held June 2 and 3 at San Francisco State University, where 300 people with a range of queer identities and disability experiences — and allies of both — gathered for a remarkable two-day event. Folks had come from all parts of the country, and also from Canada, Australia, Denmark, and the UK.

For many, it was the first time they had met other disabled queers in person, the first time they could come to an event as their whole selves. It was incredibly powerful — people coming out of lifetimes of isolation, to be visible, together, their very marginalization a

starting point for collectivity and community.

And the sheer variety of bodies, the diversity of physicality, was so gorgeous and rich. How boring non-disabled bodies can look in comparison. If that makes anyone reading out there uncomfortable, it's okay. This entire event was about reframing bodies, putting crip bodies at the center, and people with those bodies came to celebrate, to connect, to cruise and flirt, to dance and yes, to fuck. People coming to the QD conference were coming for all these things, and to fight the giant set of social assumptions that says they can't do any of them.

Raymond Luczak, a Deaf writer and filmmaker, said in his opening keynote: "Society is afraid of sex, and would prefer to neuter us, would prefer not to know that, yes, most disabled folks get horny and want to get laid just like anyone else. ... You managed to get here, to this conference, to a place where others could approach you and let you know how sexy you are, rather than being that oh-so-nice wheelchair guy who is never asked whether he has an active sex life."

In many ways, even in the lesbian/gay/bisexual world, disabled people are viewed as asexual. Fighting to dismantle this assumption is crucial, and claiming sexual desire and sexual lives is an essential part of personal empowerment and political organizing work. For disabled queer folks, claiming their sexuality becomes even more significant because queer space is sexualized space. Imagine what it takes to literally get in to that space for queers

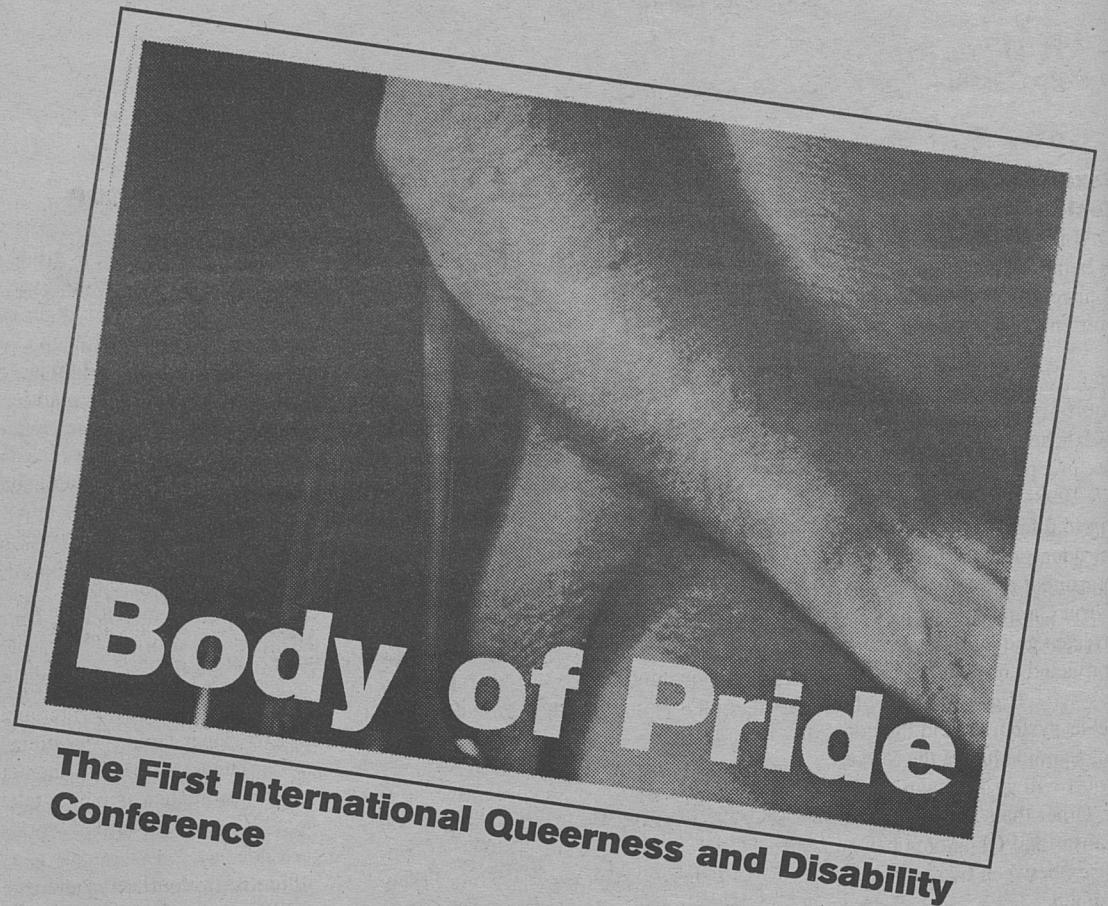


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who use wheelchairs, have bodies with limbs missing or that don't move easily, or have chemical sensitivities so debilitating they can't spend an evening in a bar even if they could make it up the stairs to get inside.

I was one of the organizers of the conference: one of only eight people who spent a good part of the last year, largely via email, planning an event that easily needed three times as many organizers involved. It had only been roughly a year since the conference was first conceived — at a Gender and Disability conference

at Rutgers University in March 2000.

I was also the only non-disabled member of our too-small group, offering support as an ally but learning every step of the way as my co-conspirators, some of them longtime disability activists, led the way in factoring in the many details of providing real access. Every document had to be available in multiple formats, from CDs to Braille. American Sign Language interpreters weren't there for some PC show, but because Deaf people needed them — at every workshop. We had to have enough volunteers to push wheel-

chairs up hills (and damn, San Francisco has a lot of them), to carry plates of food and to help people eat.

In many ways, the conference was setting new standards on access. Some have long been employed at disability gatherings — our registration and room forms asked very specific questions about bed height, wheelchair width and needs for personal care attendants. But there were some newer access considerations too. The conference was "scent free" — registrants had to

continued on page 19

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Below is an excerpt of the keynote address written by Eli Clare, author of *Exile in Pride: Disability, Queerness & Liberation* (South End Press) for the closing plenary. The speech was not presented because the closing session became an impromptu town hall meeting, largely to address racism and the specific oppression of people with psychiatric disabilities. His full speech is on the QD website.

Excerpt from "Sex, Celebration and Justice," by Eli Clare:

I want us to tell stories, to talk about our bodies, to be real about the shame and the pride. We're good at talking about oppression and how disability is truly about the material and social conditions of ableism: not about our wheelchairs but rather about the stairs without an accompanying ramp, not about our blindness but rather about the lack of Braille, not about our depression or anxiety but rather about a whole host of stereotypes. We're good at carving out our space as queer by naming ourselves as dyke, fag, bi, tranny, and then defining and defending those identities. We're good at saying the word *pride*. And I'm glad we've become good at those things, but so often in the mix we stop talking about our bodies. ...

So let me start by telling you three stories to bring my right arm, my skin, my buzzed hair and broad stance into this room.

My crip body. I spent years hating my right arm, hating the tremors that start behind my shoulder blade, race down that track of muscles from shoulder to bicep, forearm to fingertip, hating the tension that follows behind to clamp the shaking, hating that I couldn't will either away. I never talked about the red hot pain that wraps around the tension. Never talked about how being touched

can make the tremors worse. Never talked about my yearning to play the piano or fiddle, hammer a nail, fling my body into the powerful grace of a gymnast, rock climber, dancer. I wanted to cut my right arm off, ream the tremors out of me, my shame that vivid.

And still today I have to work not to hide my right hand, tuck it beneath my body, pull the tremors into me, let no one else feel them. Work to remember that my lover means it when he says, "I can't get enough of your shaky touch." Work to love my right arm, my trembling. My body, not pitiful but ordinary.

My white body. The only person of color in my childhood home—a backwoods logging town in Oregon—was an African-American kid adopted into a white family. I grew up to persistent rumors of a lynching tree way back in the hills, of the county sheriff running people of color and fags out of town. I grew up among working-class white men who made their livings by clearcutting the steep slopes, not so long ago stolen from the Tunis, the Umpquas, the Coquille peoples. Grew up among white men disabled by the body-breaking work of logging — missing limbs, hearing loss, nerve damage, broken bones knitted back together crooked. Grew up surrounded by disability and whiteness never spoken.

For a long time after moving to the city, college scholarship in hand, all I could do

was gawk at the multitude of humans: Black people, Chinese people, Chicanos, drag queens and punks, vets down on Burnside Avenue, white men in their wool suits, limos shined to sparkle. I watched them all, sucking in the thick weave of Spanish, Cantonese, street talk, English. This is how I became aware of being white, my body threaded with unspoken privilege.

My tranny body. Not so long ago, a woman stopped me on the street. She wanted to know, "You a boy?" I said, "Nope." Who knows why I answered that way; it would have been simpler to say, "Yup," and closer to the truth. She responded, "You a girl?" looking truly puzzled. I left quickly. There is no short answer.

I learned about my gendered body flying kites in the hayfields and sheep pastures, digging fence-post holes and hauling firewood with my father. He raised me, his eldest daughter, as an almost son. I had no desire to be a girl but knew I wasn't a boy. My body never learned to walk in high heels — what a joke my few attempts were, trying to fit my broad stance and shaky-heeled gait into those shoes. Never learned to feel strong and comfortable, much less sexy, in a skirt. Never stopped feeling at home in my work boots and flannel shirts, my butchness shaped by those white loggers I grew up among, overlaid by a queer urban sensibility.

Not man, not woman: I don't have one-word answers for my gendered body, just stories. Learning to knot a tie and look in the mirror at age 32. Being cruised by bears on the Castro, feeling my skin flush warm. Finding pleasure and trouble as my boyfriend and I hold hands on the subway, harassed as fags, even though later that night I'll be called ma'am at the restaurant. Using the men's room often enough to know the etiquette, sometimes choosing to brave a full bladder rather than risk the women's room. I can only tell my gender in stories. My body, not perverse, but familiar.

Stories about our bodies tangle queerness and disability together. Some theorists and activists seem to like the notion of double identity. As if I could peel off my queerness, leaving my Cerebral Palsy, or peel off the disability, leaving my whiteness, or peel off my white skin privilege, leaving my rural, mixed-class roots. Or they talk about double oppression. As if any of us can tell what the gawkers are gawking at. Are they trying to figure out whether I'm a woman or a man, dyke or fag, why I walk with a shake, talk with a slur, or are they just admiring my polished boots and denim jacket? I'll never know. ▼