



Crip Theory and the Subject of Aabledness

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Building on the productive and transgressive aspects of crip theory, this article seeks to proliferate (and not appropriate) its insights, and particularly, with the abled (or nondisabled) subject in mind. My contribution is based on a contemplation of how crip theory can speak for or include the abled subject, particularly with the aim that abled subjects can embody and/or elaborate crip politics to build a more crip world. Crip worlds reject ableism and compulsory aabledness and foreground the importance of interdependencies, accessible futures, and generative understandings of disability, and I am interested in imagining a space in which abled subjects can learn from and embody crip politics. The political ambition of this article is concerned with contemplating what kind of reckoning might unfold through an engagement between abled subjectivity and crip theory, and while this political association comes with risks, it also comes with possibilities that help to re/write the dis/abled body, proliferate anti-ableist politics, and imagine cripper worlds.

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Over the last two decades there has been a proliferation of scholarship at the intersections of disability studies and queer theory, which following McRuer's (2006) landmark text, has come to be known as crip theory. Drawing upon McRuer's (2006) observation that compulsory abledness and ableism are complexly intertwined with compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity, crip theory has pursued a critical line of inquiry that challenges ableism/heteronormativity and imagines efficacious crip/queer futures. Critical responses to crip theory have been diverse, and one important conversation has been whether it is appropriate for abled people to claim crip (Bone 2017). This conversation mirrors (but does not explicitly engage with) the analogous phenomenon in queer theory where that body of scholarship has explored straights claiming queer/ness (Butler 1993). Very little scholarship, however, has investigated what insights the abled subject might learn from crip and anti-ableist politics, and this article attends to this gap. My intention in this article is to democratise (and not appropriate) crip politics by building an affiliation between abled subjects and crip theory; or in other words, to find a space with which abled subjects can embody and/or elaborate crip politics to build a cripper world. Just as queer theory has grappled with what it can do for straight subjects (O'Rourke 2005), this article correspondingly considers what crip theory can do for abled subjectivity.

This is not to say that the relationship between crip theory and abledness has been unscrutinised. There are multiple instances in the crip theory canon that consider the relationship between crip theory and abledness. Part of the crip political project has involved challenging the hegemony (and compulsoriness) of abledness, interrogating the co-constitutive relationship between abledness and disabledness, and exploring the ethics and politics of claiming crip (McRuer 2006). Crip's capaciousness as a positionality, as opposed to an identity, opens up possibilities, claims, tensions, and misunderstandings within and beyond the disability community (Gallop 2019). The place and presence of abled people within the broader disability movement has also never been a peripheral concern (Linton 1998; Ryan & Runswick-Cole 2008). Disabled people's agency has often been called into question due to their pathologisation and abled people have often stepped in and spoken for disabled people (Charlton 1998). This has led to benefits and drawbacks amidst heated debate (Goodley 2017). While abled people have played important roles advocating for disabled people, such as the work of parents, siblings, and other allies, other pursuits have been problematic and re-instantiated paternalistic attitudes (Charlton 1998; Ryan & Runswick-Cole 2008). Disability activism remains contentious and questions about who, what, where, when, and how people speak remains especially vexed (Berghs et al. 2020).

Nevertheless, and notwithstanding the need to trouble the dis/ability distinction, within the contexts of crip theory, it is my contention that existing scholarship has failed to engage directly with the abled subject, and to specifically consider what they can learn from crip theory. McRuer (2006) notes that abled people generally consider disability in the context of minority rights models and not crip theory:

[t]he successful able-bodied subject, like the most successful heterosexual subject, has observed and internalized some of the lessons of liberation movements of the past few decades. Such movements without question throw the successful heterosexual, able-bodied subject into crisis, but he or she must perform as though they did not; the subject must demonstrate instead a dutiful (and flexible) tolerance toward the minority groups constituted through these movements (McRuer 2006: 18).

My intention in this article is to move beyond this inclusive minority rights model and instead consider what kind of reckoning might unfold through an engagement between abled subjectivity and crip theory. Part of this explication also involves troubling the ability/disability distinction that much of these debates (and prejudices) rest on. Rather than explore the rights or wrongs of abled affiliation with crip theory that currently dominates (should abled people claim crip?), I instead explore what that affiliation might generatively foster (what can abled affiliation with crip (theory) produce?), while also seeking to trouble the concept of (dis/abled) identity itself. In the contexts of feminism, Butler (1990: ix) suggests that 'it is no longer clear that feminist theory ought to try to settle the questions of primary identity in order to get on with the task of politics'. Precisely because abled and disabled are not stable categories, I suggest the task

should involve getting on with politics rather than seeking to pin-down identities. Given the (understandable) over-emphasis on disability and disabled people, however, and the alleged naturalness and taken-for-grantedness of 'ability' and its 'distinctness' from disabledness, my intention in this article is to consider more explicitly what abled subjects can learn from crip theory, to consider what the draw of crip theory might be for abled subjects, and ask what non-ableist abled people can do to elaborate, embody, imagine, and build a crip future?

The motivation for this line of inquiry partly stemmed from my reading of Thomas' edited collection, *Straight with a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality* (2000). In this text, the authors seek to proliferate the insights of queer theory, and particularly with how it may include or benefit the straight subject. This line of inquiry was itself motivated by the parallel trend in feminism, whereby men have learned about the constructions of masculinity. Drawing and borrowing from these insights, I seek to extend the reach of crip theory, particularly with the abled subject in mind, in the hopes of making the world more crip. Just as queer theory notes that straight people cannot be gay but they can be queer (O'Rourke 2005), this article considers what an abled (and not disabled) affiliation with crip can foster. This form of intellectual endeavour aligns with the queer threads contained within crip theory (McRuer 2006), and a coalitional politics that forges connections across (minority) differences.

This counter-political project is risky and far from straightforward. While there is a transgressive appeal in the straight identification of queer theory and politics—because queer is hot, and straight is not (Berlant & Warner 1995)—the prevailing attitudes circulating around disability and crip make that appeal much less strong. If disability is still dominated by the personal tragedy perspective (Oliver 1990)—or at least still contaminated by paternalistic, pathological, and medical knowledges—then any association with crip might be construed as untenable. Part of my efforts in this article involve rejecting this presumption that is informed by (internalised) ableism. What I offer is a contemplation that is premised on the assumption that crip theory can have the same generative capacity for abled people that we have likewise seen in the case of queer theory and heterosexuality—and a central part of this process is recognising the efficacy of crip worlds and futures. A crip world rejects compulsory abledness, ableism, and the differential disposability of lives, and embraces inter/dependencies, accessible futures, and generative understandings of disability (Altermark 2023; Introna 2023; Kafer 2013; Kittay 1999; McRuer 2018). As Kafer (2013: 13) argues, claiming crip allows all of us, abled and disabled, to 'acknowledg[e] that we all have bodies and minds with shifting abilities', and in recognising this, to turn our attention to alternative, interdependent, and crip social arrangements and futures.

The entanglements between and across disability studies and queer theory have enriched both disciplines, but gaps and disagreements remain. Smilges (2023: 16) suggests that one of McRuer's (2006) intentions with crip theory was to 'channel...the political urgency of *queer* into *disability's* unique phenomenology'; or to *crip* dis/ability by utilising queer theory's transgressive, appealing, and subversive tools. These lessons have not always been well-received and particularly given disability studies normalising tendencies, its preoccupation with identity claims, and queer theory's valorisation of anti-normativity (Cohen 1997; Davis 2002; Hall 2022). But crip theory and disability studies more generally have not analysed the generative capacity that queer theory has had in liberating straight subjects from their normative constraints, not to mention queer theory's successes in subverting heterosexist practices and politics (McCann & Monaghan 2020). Thinking through the generative aspects of this scholarship, I contemplate crip theory's capacity to both liberate abled subjects from the normative constraints they embody *and* to resist ableist politics. And, while queer theory may foreground anti-normativity, I want to particularly emphasise the place that crip worlds and futures have had in crip theorising. A crip world critiques and subverts normalcy, but it does so with a vision that our inherently interdependent and fragile lives can be lived differently, where care and support can be a pleasure and not a chore, and perhaps even where disability can become the rule and normalcy the exception (Altermark 2023; Introna 2023; Kafer 2013).

This article unfolds in five parts. First, I start by reviewing the origins of crip theory, and particularly its association with queer theory and its contestatory relationship with the normalising aspects of disability studies. Noting the theoretical and political distance between disability studies and crip theory, I review crip theory's more radical positionalities

and tendencies, and pay attention to some of the concerns raised. These concerns include whether crip is still an injurious term, whether it is appropriate for abled people to claim crip, and whether crip elides disabled identity. Second, I consider the benefits of crip theory, which include: crippling as a political/methodological tool; coming out crip; crip futurities; developing a theoretical language that resists abledness, ableism, and normativity; troubling the distinction between abledness and disabledness; the power of reclaiming injurious words; and finally, crip's intersectional political agenda. Each of these benefits convey the utility and efficacy of crip worlds and futures, which as I argue throughout, promote different socialities unencumbered by investments with pathology, independence, self-mastery, ableism, invulnerability, productivity, and neoliberal formations (Introna 2023; McRuer 2006; Puar 2017).

Third, I focus on the abled subject specifically and interrogate what abled crip affiliation with non-ableist politics can foster. I argue that the democratisation and proliferation of crip (theory) for abled subjects can help encourage mobilisations against ableist normativity and the building of a cripper world. Fourth, I conclude with a warning about the dangers of appropriation and insist that the aim of the political enterprise I am advocating is about democratisation and proliferation, and not appropriation, in seeking to make the world more crip. Finally, I conclude with a summation of my argument, which includes a final invitation for the abled subject to embody a crip politics. This article should be read as an invitation to open a conversation and one that values the question: how might crip theoretical engagement be redrawn in more capacious ways, and in so doing, what can non-ableist abled people do to elaborate, embody, imagine, and/or build a crip future?

ORIGINS OF CRIP THEORY

Several factors explain the development of crip theory and particularly the role that disability studies and queer theory have played in its formation. Crip theory in large part critically responds to disability studies and borrows from elements of queer theory to do that work. Crip activists increasingly disavowed the normalising tendencies of disability studies, which tends to take identity, inclusive, and minority rights approaches (Chen et al. 2023; Sandahl 2003), and borrowing from queer theory, has increasingly adopted anti-essentialist, anti-normative, and deconstructive perspectives.¹ As McRuer (2006: 35) explains, '[c]rip theory questions—or takes a sledgehammer to—that which has been concretized; it might, consequently, be comprehended as a curb cut into disability studies, and into critical theory more generally'. Or as Chen et al. (2023: 2) have noted, '[t]he praxis of crip is about being in relation to each other in such a way that risks a falling out with disability studies'. Crip theory observes the contestatory relationship between queer theory and gay and lesbian studies, and likewise views disability studies with suspicion and in need of revision (McRuer 2006).

Several resonances across and between disability and queerness explain some of the theoretical linkages between crip/queer theory (Fernández, Bosch & Samaranch 2017). As mentioned earlier, McRuer notes that compulsory abledness and ableism are complexly intertwined with compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity, such that 'compulsory heterosexuality is contingent on compulsory able-bodiedness, and vice versa' (2006: 2). Sexual and gender diverse and disabled communities also share injurious histories: 'pathologized by medicine; demonized by religion; discriminated against in housing, employment, and education; stereotyped in representation; victimized by hate groups; and isolated socially, often in their families of origin' (Sandahl 2003: 26). Disabled and sexual and gender diverse populations also intersect with a range of other characteristics, including age, race, class, religion, and political affiliation, and multiple cultures and subcultures run in and through these intersections (Sandahl 2003). Crip/queer theory and disability/gay and lesbian studies have different visions regarding how to respond to these injustices (McRuer 2006).

While minority rights models—as evidenced in gay and lesbian studies and disability studies—seek inclusion, tolerance, and normalisation into the social order, crip/queer theory and politics instead embraces difference, seeks to de-essentialise identity, and promotes ethical forms of

¹ For overviews and histories of disability studies, see: Davis (2021), Goodley (2017), Watson and Vehmas (2020), for examples.

non-normativity and ways of living otherwise (McRuer 2006; Goodley 2014). McRuer warns against identity-based inclusion politics:

...to the extent that identity-movement identities are rehabilitated identities (“gay is good [not bad],” “black is beautiful [not ugly],” “disabled and proud [not pitiful]”), they are also in some ways normative identities that inevitably incorporate generic sameness *in and through their distinctiveness* and that require and produce degraded others (2006: 141).

Derrida (in Borradori 2003: 128) likewise suggests that tolerance is inhospitable (to others) and problematically has ‘biological, genetic, or organicist connotations’. For McRuer (2006: 75), we need to build ‘a world beyond ramps and gay marriage, beyond identity politics and analyses that would isolate the cultural from the economic and vice versa’. Crip theory rejects inclusion, tolerance, and normalisation because it reifies pathologised and essentialised identities, and one aspect of crip theory must involve ‘grap[pling] with the spaces where identity unravels’ (McRuer 2006: 144).

Against this backdrop, McRuer (2006) proposes five tentative principles for crip theory. First, disability and disability identity politics can be claimed, but it is necessary that a contestatory relationship is maintained towards that identity politics (McRuer 2006). Second, claiming a queer/disabled history of ‘coming out’ while also talking back to parent cultures of ‘staying in’ (McRuer 2006). Third, demanding that another world is possible, and one that is accessible on local and global scales. Part of this requires that we reject neoliberalism because it both demands abledness (via productivity) and entrenches inequality (McRuer 2006). Fourth, contending that a disabled world is possible and desirable, and *cripping*—that is, challenging the ways that disability is problematically constituted through the forces of compulsory abledness and ableism—forces that deny this notion and possibility (McRuer 2006). Fifth, interrogating the ways that dis/ability is ‘conceived, materialized, spatialized, and populated’, and in concert with other vectors of social oppression (McRuer 2006: 72). Crip theory, as originally intended, stands as a theoretical intervention that rejects typologies of the ‘acceptability’ of particular bodies, encourages the proliferation of a range of disabled subjectivities, and seeks to imagine more desirable (disability/crip) futures (McRuer 2006).

Engagements with crip theory have continued with many of the traditions that McRuer (2006) laid out. Goodley (2014: 38) suggests that crip theory represents one of the ‘strongest growing insights into critical disability studies’, while Bennett (2022: 2) notes it has ‘evolved into a vibrant field of study for generating new forms of knowledge that scrutinize dominant assumptions of the social world and strive to incorporate diffuse bodily experiences into otherwise restrictive structures’. Just as the social model of disability became a ‘eureka moment’ for many (Crow 1996), crip theory likewise has been liberating for a range of (dis/abled/crip/queer) bodyminds (Mingus 2010; Smilges 2023). As with any new field of study, however, questions and debates have arisen, and several dominant themes have emerged from supporters and detractors alike.

Critical questions of crip theory have emerged, including whether the word crip is still injurious or only available for privileged people, whether crip theory only refers to physical disability, whether it is appropriate for abled people to claim crip, and whether crip theory elides disabled identity (Bone 2017; Jenks 2019; Löfgren-Mårtenson 2013; Sherry 2013; Vehmas & Watson 2014). Sherry (2013), for example, argues that crip is still injurious for many disabled people, and that it may only be available for reappropriation by privileged people/activists. Löfgren-Mårtenson (2013) wonders whether crip theory includes people with intellectual disability because they are seldom mentioned in crip theory scholarship. Löfgren-Mårtenson (2013: 420) suggests McRuer’s theorising ‘proceeds from people with physical disabilities’ because his usage of ‘able-bodiedness’ elides intellectual disability.² Kulick and Rydström (2015) make a similar argument by suggesting that crip theory elides ‘severely disabled’ subjects (and, more broadly, focuses too much on culture, theory, and discourse). However, there are myriad instances in McRuer’s (2006) text that point to the expansiveness of crip *positionalities*, and Sandahl (2003: 27) wrote three years prior:

2 Since this time the term ‘bodymind’ has become an increasingly popular strategy for rejecting the body-mind dualism (Price 2015).

[t]he term *crip* has expanded to include not only those with physical impairments but those with sensory or mental impairments as well. Though I have never heard a nondisabled person seriously claim to be *crip* (as heterosexuals have claimed to be *queer*), I would not be surprised by this practice. The fluidity of both terms makes it likely that their boundaries will dissolve (*italics in original*).

Since this time abled people have claimed *crip*, including Schalk's (2013) *crip* dis/identification as a (then) abled scholar. For Schalk (2013: np), dis/identifying as *crip* enables one to 'work both with and against identity', and enables coalitional theory and political solidarity. Abled *crip* identification is contentious, with some claiming it amounts to appropriation or that abled people are problematically speaking above/over/for disabled people, and thus silencing their voices (Bone 2017).

My contention, however, is that these critiques rely on reductive and simplified notions of *crip* theory. For example, Sherry (2013: np) suggests that McRuer (2006) is 'imposing...an epistemological framework on disabled people', yet McRuer (2006: 40) writes that *crip* should remain 'permanently and desirably contingent', is simply a response to disability studies, and in later work with Johnson (2014a: 248), notes that 'the work, as it unfolded, had so much to do with inviting conversation, searching out community, wondering aloud what ... [*crip*] could do or mean'. Disability evokes a range of responses and disagreements occur across a range of topics and theoretical perspectives. Much of the critiques towards *crip* theory ultimately rest on deep-seated ideological differences that depend upon affiliations with the social model of disability, identity politics, the participatory turn, realism, inclusion, and normalisation. Within this context, *crip* theory is conceived as a threat, and disability studies more generally is seen as a safer (and more palatable) refuge from which to articulate a broader, inclusive politics.

My contribution seeks to move beyond the 'contestatory relationship' (McRuer 2006: 35) between disability studies and *crip* theory, and instead to proliferate the findings and insights of *crip* theory with the abled subject in mind. It is my contention that investments in *crip* worlds help resist the injuriousness of (internalised) ableism and compulsory abledness, and through grappling with our bodies, helps to refashion forms of interdependencies that are central to our lives (Samuels & Freeman 2021). I likewise suggest this counter-political project should not rest on the disabled subject alone—I compel the abled subject to grapple with these questions, and to perhaps find refuge in the ethics and politics of *crip* theories, relationalities, and positionalities. In short, what possibilities are opened up by abled engagement and participation with *crip* theory? Articulating the benefits of *crip* theory for dis/abled people and society more generally is central to this endeavour.

THE BENEFITS OF CRIP THEORY

McRuer (2006) has claimed that *crip* theory would need to be invented if it didn't exist and suggests that it serves as a transformational politics to manifest change in the world. As Karlsson and Rydström (2023: 12) recently noted, *crip* theory 'provides a clear and powerful framework for undertaking a comprehensive critique of ableist inequalities in society and for developing activist strategies' against them. Within this and other accounts, there appears to be an implicit focus on the benefits of *crip* theory for disabled people, yet I would like to emphasise and proliferate the findings of *crip* theory for abled people, with the goal of making the world more *crip*. Ableism, after all, is oppressive to everyone, as it instantiates and internalises scripts on *all* lives, relationships, and ways of being in the world. Ableism 'stretches and folds itself into nearly every domain of life' (Smilges 2022: 6), and its insidiousness requires collective responses. Campbell (2019: 146) notes that compulsory abledness is a 'symptom and outcome of ableist processes', and as such, it is important that abled subjects grapple with the terms that define their subjectivity. In this section, I review several main benefits of *crip* theory, including: *cripping*; coming out *crip*; its capacity to imagine alternative (accessible and interdependent) *crip* futures; resistance to norms, abledness, and ableism; troubling the dis/ability binary; the power of reclaiming injurious words; and finally, an intersectional political agenda. This contextualises the following section that turns these insights towards the abled subject.

Following in the footsteps of queer theory and queering, *crip* theory has likewise adopted the methodological and political practice of *cripping*, which deploys *crip* as a verb in challenging and

resisting existing norms. Crippling, Sandahl (2003: 37) writes, involves ‘spin[ning] mainstream representations or practices to reveal able-bodied assumptions and exclusionary effects ... [to] expose the arbitrary delineation between normal and defective and the negative social ramifications of attempts to homogenize humanity’. ‘To crip’ is to highlight both non-normative ways of living and being and to challenge dominant assumptions that the abled body is the normal, natural, and better body (Sandahl 2003). Crippling involves a tactical act that seeks to identify and conjure alternative ways of living and being crip. Importantly, Chen et al. (2023) caution that ‘cripping’ has too often focused on individual and interpersonal circumstances, and they thus encourage the crippling of broader and collective socio-structural phenomena.

One notable manifestation of crippling is crip time (drawing upon the notion of queer time). Crip time seeks to encourage a more critical appreciation of the different temporalities by which dis/abled people live their lives, and it does this by foregrounding the ableism inherent to the normative construction of (clock) time (Ljuslinder, Ellis & Vikström 2020). Crip time challenges normative assumptions and expectations about pace and scheduling and highlights alternative crip temporalities (Kafer 2013). Crip time is not simply about extra or slow time (as many people may live on accelerated time), but about flexible time (Samuels 2017). Crip/ping time involves reorienting our attitudes and approaches to time, and of ‘break[ing] in our bodies and minds to new rhythms, new patterns of thinking and feeling and moving through the world’ (Samuels 2017: np). Crip/ping time involves a form of ‘letting go’ to the conventional timelines and temporalities that ordinarily structure our lives. Crip/ping time also helps to critique the cultural logics and impacts of neoliberalism (McRuer 2018).

Crip theory also permits and/or encourages people to claim crip, or what McRuer (2006: 33) calls ‘coming out crip’ and Kafer (2013: 14) describes as ‘crip affiliation’. Kafer (2013: 13) argues that claiming crip involves:

...a method of imagining multiple futures, positioning ‘crip’ as a desired and desirable location regardless of one’s own embodiment or mental/psychological processes ... [It] can be a way of acknowledging that we all have bodies and minds with shifting abilities, and wrestling with the political meanings and histories of such shifts ... thinking through what nondisabled claims to crip might entail will require exploring whether such claims might be more available, or more imaginable, to some people than others (and on what basis).

For Kafer (2013), claiming crip, including abled crip claims, invites a reckoning with which to reimagine the future, and that a crip future is a more desirable future because it abandons ableism and involves a greater appreciation of living with our inherently fragile corporealities and interdependencies. Schalk (2013) also associates themselves with this form of politics, suggesting disidentification—understood in a Muñozian (1999) vein—with crip can create personal, political, sustaining, and affective resonances with minoritarian groups, including disabled people. McRuer (2006) more specifically conceptualises the act of ‘coming out crip’ as a tool to speak back to compulsory normativity and particularly compulsory abledness. For McRuer (2006: 52), coming out crip ‘allows for the emergence of new disabled subjectivities’, and particularly ones that focus on resisting compulsory abledness and attendant ableism. The benefit of coming out crip is that it ‘call[s] attention to the ways in which the disability rights movement and disability studies have resisted the demands of compulsory able-bodiedness and have demanded access to a newly imagined and newly configured public sphere where full participation is not contingent on an able body’ (McRuer 2006: 30). Coming out crip reconfigures the dis/abled subject in more generative ways and disrupts the hegemony of abledness.

Crip/ping time and claiming crip also enables the formation and development of alternative crip futurities. Disabled people are often cast out of the future (Kafer 2013), yet by crippling time and claiming crip, alternative temporal scales and futurities can be envisaged (Rice et al. 2017). As Kafer (2013: 13) asks, ‘[c]an claiming crip be a method of imagining multiple futures, positioning ‘crip’ as a desired and desirable location regardless of one’s own embodiment or mental/psychological processes?’ Rejecting linear and normative (or straight and abled) time unsettles conventional trajectories and offers one route to remap existing (heteronormative and ableist) orientations. Informed by Kittay (1999), Butler (2020), Smilges (2023), and Titchkosky (2011), I see the politics of accessibility and interdependency central to this endeavour. Conceptualised in collective rather than individual senses, accessibility must involve

moving beyond ramps and Braille and other physical architecture and instead transforming the ways in which we relate to and depend upon each other (Titchkosky 2011; Smilges 2023). Kittay (1999: xii) writes that ‘interdependence starts with dependence’, and ‘because no body can sustain itself on its own’ (Butler 2020: 49), there needs to be greater recognition for our dependencies, interdependencies, and grievabilities, such that alternative and efficacious (crip) futures become promissory.

Crip theory contains the capacity to develop and articulate a theoretical language and methodology with which to identify and challenge ableism, compulsory abledness, and normativity. Abledness refers to a set of social relations that result in the naturalisation of ability (Goodley 2014). Far from being a self-evident or static category, abledness is a relational and discursively constituted category that requires problematisation and deconstruction (Campbell 2019). Hughes (2007: 678) notes that there is an ‘ontological view that human worth is closely associated with ability’, and this is predetermined through the forces of compulsory abledness and attendant normativity (McRuer 2006). A key benefit of crip theory is that of refusing abledness, which necessitates a ‘letting go’ of ableist norms, and by extension, efficaciously embracing disabledness and ethical non-normativity (Campbell 2009). Deconstructing abledness, normativity, and ableism opens up possibilities for living otherwise.

Crip theory also powerfully troubles the distinction between abledness and disabledness (McRuer 2006). McRuer (2006) notes two common truisms in disability studies: we will all likely become disabled at some point in our lives, and disability will be the one identity category that most of us will inhabit. But the point goes further: there is a slipperiness between abledness and disabledness, they are constituted in simultaneous relation to each other, and we can never fully embody either category all the time (Goodley 2014; McRuer 2006). Following Fuss (1991: 3) on the distinction between heterosexuality/homosexuality, we might also be able to say that abledness can never fully ignore the close psychological proximity of its terrifying disabled other, any more than disabledness can entirely escape the equally insistent social pressures of abled conformity—each is haunted by the other. Troubling the dis/abled binary is important in resisting the fixity of identity, and in enabling more intelligible ways of being and doing in the world. Recognising the instability and fantasy of the dis/abled binary enables a de-emphasis on the politics of identities—and some of the anxieties around ‘crip identity’ (Bone 2017)—and encourages movements towards a better political project that involves fashioning crip futures for everyone (Rice et al. 2017).

One not insignificant benefit of crip theory is its reclamation of an injurious word: crip. Crip, of course, is short for ‘cripple’, and has historically been used derogatively against disabled people (Clare 2015). Crip theory follows in the queer theory tradition of re-appropriating, and thus neutralizing, injurious words. ‘Crip’ is a harsh word, but that ‘harshness is a large part of its appeal’ (Kafer 2013: 15). Kafer (2013: 15) notes that many people may wince at ‘crip’, but the ‘desire to make people wince suggests an urge to shake things up, to jolt people out of their everyday understandings of bodies and minds, of normalcy and deviance’. The benefit of crip is that it can be rebadged from pathology to pride, it neutralizes and disarms the power of crip as an invective, it helps to forge a new generative identity, it can signal intimacy or nonconformity, and it may build a network intent on radical social transformation (Chen et al. 2023).

Finally, many scholars have noted crip’s intersectional political agenda and its capacity to challenge settler colonialism, capitalism, racism, white supremacy, and other matrices of oppression (Chen et al. 2023; Samuels & Freeman 2021). Just as crip theory is co-implicated with dismantling heteronormativity via its resonances with queer theory, crip theorists likewise note ableism’s entanglements with whiteness, settler colonialism, racism, capitalism, classism, sanism, and patriarchy (Smilges 2023). Crip thought continues to be transgressive and radical and draws upon a range of abolitionist (Ben-Moshe 2020), environmental and non-human (Ray and Sibara 2017), posthuman (Goodley, Lawthom & Runswick-Cole 2014), and postcolonial (Puar 2017) perspectives that seek to upend the violent status quo. The intersectional legacies of disability studies and queer theory continue to chart crip theory’s intersectional trajectory. I suggest that one under-explored figure in this equation is the abled subject, so I turn to the question: to what extent can an otherwise abled subject embody or elaborate a crip politics?

How might the findings and insights of crip theory be further proliferated to aid the abled subject? This is a provocative line of inquiry given the ways that abledness functions so hegemonically as a self-evident, epistemologically *a priori* and invisible category, and ‘masquerades as a non-identity, as the natural order of things’ (McRuer 2006: 1). Abled subjects have had the political luxury of not having to think about their abledness, just as straights have not had to think about their sexuality, men have not thought about being gendered, or whites not thinking of themselves as raced (McRuer 2006; Thomas 2000). Yet it is important that abled people (drawn to formulations of crip) interrogate their own abled practices, identifications, repressions, and exclusions. Stryker (1994: 246, 241), a ‘transsexual leatherdyke’, invites such a reckoning in the context of trans and cis subjectivity: ‘[y]ou [cis] are as constructed as me [trans]; the same anarchic womb has birthed us both. I call upon you to investigate your nature as I have been compelled to confront mine ... Heed my words, and you may well discover the seams and sutures in yourself’. It is my contention that it is likewise important that abled subjects can learn from crip theory to make interventions into the reproduction of ableism and (compulsory) abledness.

To twist Thomas’ (2000: 11) queer question in *Straight with a Twist* to a crip context, to what extent could an otherwise abled subject elaborate a crip criticism? One strong possibility is that of abled resistance and disloyalty to ableist structures. It is incumbent upon abled subjects drawn to crip affiliation to critique and subvert ableist theories and practices. To again twist one of Thomas’ (2000: 13) questions from a queer to a crip context, what would it mean for ableds to really understand (and not just theoretically toy with) the crip argument that the normative regimens they inhabit and embody are ideological fictions rather than natural inevitabilities, performatives rather than constatives? After such knowledge, what normalness? I contend that it is incumbent upon abled subjects drawn to crip affiliation to participate in the dismantling of their normative status.

The re-positioning from an abled hegemonic identity to self-representation as a crip is the most conspicuous form or representation of abled crip identification. This individualised and voluntarist act, however, needs to be linked to broader and proliferating aims and practices. One central aim should involve challenging the hegemony of abledness. Abledness is neither a stable or natural identity; rather, it is a construction based on changing social and cultural mores (Campbell 2009). The dominant system of institutionalised abledness operates through an abled/disabled divide and made universalised and naturalised, and thus creating and reproducing abledness as an invisible category. Participating in a critique that dismantles your own abled normative status helps to destabilise and denaturalise abled normativity. The phenomenon of something that could be called ‘crip abledness’ contests abledness by suggesting that abled subjects are in fact produced through competing discourses, technologies, and practices, and can thus perform abledness in varying ways (Schlichter 2004). Crip abledness reconfigures alternative forms of sociality by militating against normativity.

The concept of ‘cripistemology’ may prove useful in the contexts of abled crip identification. A portmanteau of ‘crip’ and ‘epistemology’, cripistemology invites ways of knowing and unknowing ‘disability’ from a range of crip perspectives (Johnson & McRuer 2014b). Johnson and McRuer (2014b: 130) explain their thinking as they developed the term:

...knowing and unknowing disability, making and unmaking disability epistemologies, and the importance of challenging subjects who confidently ‘know’ about ‘disability,’ as though it could be a thoroughly comprehended object of knowledge. We were questioning, in other words, what we think we know about disability, and how we know around and through it.

It may be that abled crip identification helps question what we think we know, ‘around’ and ‘through’, disability. While the term has genealogical connections with disabled subjectivity (i.e. ‘situated knowledges’ and sitpoint theory), it may be that, from the perspective of abled crip identification, meanings and attachments towards ‘disability’ become unstable (yet, importantly, productive). (Dis/abled) crip positionalities invite ‘new ways of thinking, knowing, and communicating across difference’ (Johnson & McRuer 2014a: 254), and may unsettle existing epistemological frameworks.

Abled crip identification may also enable forms of solidarity across dis/abled communities and other oppressed groups more generally. Wendell (1989), for example, suggests that if we knew more about pain, limitation, and disabledness, then perhaps we would live with less fear of our bodies, less fear of our imperfections and weaknesses, and accept our inevitable fate of deterioration and death. So too, we would be able to understand the disabled other and form coalitions and interdependencies. Part of this political project is the recognition that abledness is temporary, which involves:

...not simply that all and any of us may be repositioned, but that if the boundaries between the apparently secure self and those others can be breached, then any response founded in fixed binary difference is likely to be inadequate. A more radical politics of disability, then, would disrupt the norms of dis/abled identity, not by pluralising the conditions of disability, as the notion of TABs [temporarily abled bodies] intends, but rather by exposing the failure of those norms to ever fully and finally contain a definitive standard (Price & Shildrick 1998: 236).

Abledness is unstable and contingent, and abled subjects need to rid themselves of their complicity with the illusion of control, autonomy, stability, independence, invulnerability, productivity, and mastery. The supposedly neutral subject position of 'abled' is in fact a lie, and recognising this brute fact starts a journey towards rethinking the conditions in which abledness is privileged and disabledness is denigrated. It may be that coming to grips with our bodies, with what they can and cannot do in various contexts and over time and space, will ameliorate anxieties and hostilities towards the disabled other. A supposedly abled subject drawn to crip affiliation can both associate themselves with crip politics and disavow the compulsoriness of the ableist project.

Notwithstanding the focus on dis/ability politics, part of this political project must also involve waging conflict against broader oppressive structures—neoliberalism, for instance—that create and perpetuate the violent status quo and its deleterious impacts on disabled and other marginalised bodyminds (Goodley & Lawthom 2019; Puar 2017). Neoliberalism, for example, consolidates certain (problematic) onto-epistemologies of dis/ability (Goodley et al. 2019). Working within the confines of dis/ability politics should be one part of a broader agenda, and this 'and/both' over 'either/or' strategy enables dis/ability representations and materialisations to be redrawn in individual and collective ways (McRuer 2018). Working against these broader structures contributes to unsettling the constitution and regulation of dis/abled subject positions and may help proliferate crip ontologies for many (Goodley & Lawthom 2019). Multi-scaled strategies within and beyond dis/ability politics enable ableism to be fought multi-dimensionally and help proliferate (but not appropriate) the insights of crip in building a cripper world that troubles the hegemony of abledness.

RISKS OF APPROPRIATION

Haunting the political project I am undertaking is that of appropriation. There is a risk, one might posit, that abled subjects may appropriate the crip signifier by assimilating themselves within crip theory, or incorporate crip theory within a governing framework, or perhaps more worryingly, seize crip theory's tools for abled uses. These are serious concerns. Boon (2007: 2) describes appropriation as the process of 'taking something that arguably belongs to someone else'. Similarly, Strong (1996: 125) writes:

I have appropriated something when I have made it mine, in a manner that I feel comfortable with, that is in a manner to which the challenges of others will carry little or no significance. A text, we might then say, is appropriated when its reader does not find him or herself called into question by it, but does find him or herself associated with it. A successfully appropriated text no longer troubles the appropriator that it has become part of his or her understanding, and it is recognized by others as 'owned,' not openly available for interpretation.

It is this form of appropriation that needs to be avoided. Abled subjects should not uncritically assimilate themselves with crip theory, but rather, proliferate its findings and insights and necessarily *maintain a troubled and contested relationship with/to it*. Anzaldúa (1990: xxi) notes

that the ‘difference between appropriation and proliferation is that the first steals and harms; the second helps heal breaches of knowledge’. It is my contention that abled usages of crip theory should not steal or harm, but instead help proliferate its insights in building a more crip future.

This is of course easier said than done, and what might be proliferation for one person might be appropriation for another. Disability politics is a fraught business where intellectual and emotional experiences, theories, and politics criss-cross in complex (and contradictory) ways (Goodley 2017). Difficult questions—such as the meaning of disability and who disability studies includes—remain intractable (Söder 2009; Kristiansen, Vehmas & Shakespeare 2009). Disability (and its politics) is heterogenous rather than homogenous (Katsui & Swartz 2021; Puar 2017), and what is progressive or regressive is contextual as multiple readings and interpretations are always available. Democratising crip theory does not involve imposing an epistemological framework but instead imagining possibility and inviting reflection, conversation, and critique. ‘Democracy’ and ‘democratise’ are terms subject to constant abuse, but I am using them in connection with progressive radical political action where accountability, ethics, accessibility, participation, solidarity, and collectivism remain central (Altermark 2023; Martin 2009; Young 1990). Appropriation is a risk, but this should not mean we abandon creativity and fall back into regressive and conservative modes of thinking, and especially when the promise of crip is so productive and exciting (Introna 2023).

Importantly, the risk of appropriation may not be as pressing as some might think. McRuer (2006: 36) notes, ‘if the constraints of compulsory able-bodiedness push some politicized activists and artists with disabilities to come out crip, those constraints simultaneously keep many other disabled and nondisabled people from doing so’. For McRuer (2006: 36), compulsory abledness ‘makes the nondisabled claim to be crip ... unlikely for several reasons’. First, an abled crip claim refuses, disclaims, or disavows the privileges that compulsory abledness affords, but this form of resistance requires active and ongoing commitment because they are constituted within a network that constantly privileges them. In this context, McRuer (2006: 36) argues that:

...nondisabled crips need to acknowledge that able-bodied privileges do not magically disappear simply because they are individually refused; the compulsions of compulsory able-bodiedness and the benefits that accrue to nondisabled people within that system are bigger than any individual’s seemingly voluntary refusal of them.

An abled crip claim does nothing in and of itself, but must require an active, ongoing, and simultaneous adherence to crip politics and a refusal to be caught within the privileges of abled/ableist norms. Second, and related, abled crip identification is unlikely because it requires knowledge that the abled/disabled binary is in fact not self-evident and universal but rather nonnatural and hierarchical (McRuer 2006). It is perhaps unlikely that abled people would claim crip because the abled/disabled binary, and the abled and disabled subject positions, are largely conceived as ontological states and not the product of cultural and political processes (McRuer 2006). Third and finally, McRuer (2006) claims that abled people may not claim crip because they are wary of the dangers of appropriation. It appears that the fear of appropriation is enough to negate the appeal of abled crip identification.

Nevertheless, McRuer (2006: 37) still argues in favour of ‘unlikely identifications’ and recognising the ‘risky project’ of this political endeavour, is still invested in generating ‘a critical space where certain nondisabled claims to be crip are more imaginable’. For McRuer (2006: 57), sometimes it is more ‘important to raise issues about what it means, for the purposes of solidarity, to come out as something you are—at least in some ways—not’. The point here is that abled crip claims need to be embedded and associated within an ethical framework. The goal is democratisation and proliferation, not appropriation, and a firm, ongoing, troubled, and self-reflexive commitment to crip politics and anti-ableist futures.

CONCLUSION

While the line of inquiry that I have interrogated in this article may be construed as provocative—particularly within the area of conventional Disability Studies—it is also important to highlight

that this political project does not operate in a vacuum. Instead, it is borne from a history of claiming identification with oppressed minoritarian subjects: whites with the civil rights movement, men with feminism, straight with queer, and (now) abled with crip (Schlichter 2004). It is my contention that exploring anti-ableist abled crip affiliation, and the means by which to challenge the current ableist order, should be a central concern within Disability Studies.

The charge of appropriation nevertheless looms large. Disability Studies has historically been subject to the ‘excluded voice’ thesis, whereby disabled people have been constituted as too vulnerable to communicate/participate in research, and the voices of parents, carers, and others have been privileged in lieu of disabled people (Booth & Booth 1996). Such practices explain the push towards the ‘participatory turn’ and the famous slogan, ‘Nothing About Us Without Us’. In this context, it could easily be suggested that abled crip identification represents another form of appropriation or co-optation. And yet, I also agree with Thomas’ (2000: 258) claim that ‘the charge of appropriation is made as a way of not having to think about or deal with specific arguments and issues’. I believe the potential benefits outweigh the risks, but this claim is conditional upon cautious, vigilant, reflexive, and autocritical engagement, and I also invite others to identify the gaps or obstructed views I have failed to see. Critique is critical, but only with good intentions and receptive and considered audiences.

What I have articulated here is also not new. As McRuer (2006: 41) notes, a ‘simultaneous articulation and disarticulation of crip identities and identifications has been part of crip theory from the beginning’. My contribution has taken up these disparate ideas and integrated them, tried to establish the grounds upon which these dis/identifications can be established, and why. Butler (1993: 75) argues that ‘it may be only by risking the incoherence of identity that connection is possible’, and I remain invested in the idea that cripily aspiring ableds may challenge both their abled practices and their conditions of possibility. An abled negotiation of crip theory comes with its risks, but the possibilities may help rewrite the dis/abled body, proliferate anti-ableist politics, and build a crip world.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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