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Crip Excess, Art, and Politics: A Conversation with Robert McRuer

Danielle Peers, Melisa Brittain, and Robert McRuer

A book, article, or theory might be judged not only by the insightfulness of the claims it makes, but also by the connections, possibilities, and politics that it fosters. By these criteria, Robert McRuer's publications, of which the most widely known is *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (2006), are crucial. He weaves together an array of theories, cultural productions, and socio-historical contexts with great care, wit, and generosity. The result is a complex analysis of the role of compulsory able-bodiedness in the context of globalized neoliberal capitalism. McRuer's work is as generative as it is insightful, and as creative as it is political. He provokes his audiences to foster new crip connections, and to explore new crip possibilities and practices, whether academic, artistic, activist, or otherwise.

It was with great pleasure that we, Danielle Peers (DP) and Melisa Brittain (MB), met up with Robert McRuer (RM) for a video interview at the Health, Embodiment, and Visual Culture Conference at McMaster University in November 2011. The conversation has been transcribed and expanded on here.

DP: Robert, for those who have not yet read your work, can you explain what crip theory is?

RM: I think crip theory is a collective practice. First of all, I think that it is a practice that has been generated by a lot of queers, in one sense, partly because the workings of compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness have been so intertwined for more than a century. And it's really queer crips, crip queers, who have understood those workings really well. And hence, crip theory is this critical cultural practice that has been developed in a lot of queer communities, by artists, activists, and academics, writers of all kinds, poets, painters; many different kinds of cultural workers have put into practice what I think we can call crip theory.

That said, I wouldn't say there is an absolute consensus on what crip theory is. I would say that in many ways it is something that's very much about excess. Compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness generate sites of containment, where disability and queerness are managed, contained, kept quiet, kept

silent. And crip cultural production has been about saying, “we’re not going to stand for that,” so to speak. “We are going to generate visions of the body and desire and community that are in excess of attempts to contain and manage us.” And there is not absolute consensus about what crip theory is, because that generative excess has been so incredibly varied.

- MB:** Can you offer us some specific examples of crip cultural or artistic practice, and discuss how this excess plays out in the work?
- RM:** When I think about, say, the work of actor, performance artist, and writer Terry Galloway, with the Mickee Faust theatre company in Florida, in their film, *Scary Lewis Yell-a-thon* (Nudd and Wilkins 2004), there is an inhabiting of exactly the worst ableist stereotypes that are played out by the Jerry Lewis Telethon. In and through the longstanding queer cultural tradition of camp, there is an implosion of able-bodied ideologies in this beautifully excessive way. Galloway performs in drag as Jerry Lewis and parodies Lewis’ pathos and sentimentality. “Do we have any of my cripples here?” he asks the audience, and then one of his “kids” (actually an adult man seated in a wheelchair) is asked to stand for a round of applause. The man half-heartedly hoists himself up on the arms of the chair. The parody later shifts to, and luxuriates in, the “true-to-life” story of Little Teensy Weensy Tiny Teena (played by disability theorist Carrie Sandahl), who walked *all by herself* to appear at the Yell-a-thon with Scary Lewis on a conspicuously inaccessible stage. Sandahl plays Tiny Teena with over-the-top cutesiness, with a big bow in her hair, and a huge smile on her face. All Tiny Teena wants to do is please Scary Lewis who, at the end of the parody, decides to stuff cash in her mouth (and kill her!) because she fails to perform “cure” adequately by taking a few steps without her crutches.
- DP:** As you offer this description, I can’t help but think about how similar these themes and parodic elements are to those Melisa and I utilized in our first short video, *G.I.M.P. Boot Camp* (Brittain and Peers 2008): the conspicuously inaccessible stage, the patting on the head, and the violent repercussions of failing to perform “disability” in the expected way. Whereas I think it is easy to read these filmic parallels in terms of similar experiences of disability, I think that it is more theoretically and politically useful to consider that they stem from shared experiences of what you so aptly describe as “compulsory able-bodiedness” (McRuer 2006, 8). In reading the parallels in this way, the humor in these videos becomes readable not only as a shared in-joke amongst crips, but also as a (celebratory and excessive) critique of both able-bodiedness and the social construction of disability.
- RM:** Yes, it’s not at all surprising to me that these two crip parodies share so much! I think a lot of crip theory and cultural production has been about generating a wide range of strong affects, of crip emotions, that are then shared. And I would say shared across communities, shared across bodies, and shared across borders. When you think about Loree Erickson’s work in *Want* (2005), that film just gives us over and over again that verb: “I want to be a girl you picture naked, a girl you fuck in public . . . I want to be a girl you laugh with, a girl you have fun with . . . I want to be the girl you make come so hard she can’t even scream.” I want, I want, I want, I want, I want. And it’s that sense of affect that she wants to share with her lovers, but also share with her viewers. As Erickson (Erickson, Peers, and Brittain 2010) said in the roundtable at the Health, Embodiment, and Visual Culture Conference at McMaster University, she *wants* because she didn’t *have* images that were femmegimp images. She went into a lesbian store in San Francisco, didn’t find those images, and so decided she was going to be a porn star. And what a lovely example of crip theory on the ground: “I don’t see what I want here; I’m going to be a porn star.”

So there's this sense of sharing that emerges, and a yearning, and I think that crip theory is also about those kinds of affects. I think that crip theory is also, in a more strictly theoretical sense, about recognizing that heterosexuality and able-bodiedness, for more than a century and a half, have instituted themselves as intertwined and invisible norms.

People often ask me: "Why queer studies and disability studies?" "Why queer theory and disability theory?" "Why were those two so uniquely linked?" And I say, well, the history of heterosexuality—a relatively specific form of loving that became a norm and identity over the past century and a half—was really closely intertwined with another form of normalcy that, like heterosexuality, was also made invisible. And that's the norm of able-bodiedness—also, when you think about it, a relatively specific and non-representative way of moving through the world.

And so I think queer-crip practices have worked to expose the invisibility of these normative identities, and the larger naturalization of normalcy.

DP: What brought you to studying this intersection between compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory heterosexuality?

RM: People make various assumptions about why I do crip theory. My mother, for instance, when my father was dying after living for more than a decade with Parkinson's, said to me, "Do you do disability studies because of Dad?" She didn't say do you do crip theory because of Dad, because she's a fundamentalist Baptist woman and doesn't even know that I wrote a book called *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. However, she did ask me once, "Did you do disability studies because of Dad?"

So, there are always these assumptions about, you know, how did you get here? But really, the easy answer is that, as a gay man of a certain age, I came to crip theory because of the AIDS crisis. And when I began doing my own work in graduate school, and with young queer communities in the late 80s and early 90s, it was all about thinking about how the institutions of media, government, medicine, etc., were failing us. And that the structures of oppression were exactly that: *structures* of oppression. Not just sort of incidental prejudice, but institutions that were defined to, again, contain and manage the body, desire, gender, race. The heyday of AIDS activism was exactly when I was going to school, exactly when I was studying queer theory for the first time. I was all involved in that in the late 80s and early 90s, and so I was already doing AIDS cultural theory when I began work in disability studies.

And then, there is this really sweet personal story. I was in a reading group on the body with Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and we all would bring readings to the group at different moments of the group's existence. When it was my turn I, of course, brought stuff that was about stigma and HIV and the AIDS crisis: I had the group read selections from John Nguyet Erni's (1994) important book on deconstructing the language of "cure." Although I could have brought many AIDS cultural theorists who really, I'd say, represent crip theory *avant la lettre*: Paula Treichler (1999), Jan Zita Grover (1987), Douglas Crimp (2004)—and certainly filmmakers like Gregg Araki or Marlon Riggs as well. So in this reading group, as we were going up the elevator to talk about Erni's text, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson said, "you know, this is really disability studies." So at that moment, *Crip Theory*, the book, was born. And she called me a month later and said, "Would you write something on the intersections of queerness and disability?"

I started to write it, and I said, "This is not an essay, this is a book, this is a career, this is a culture, this is multiple people's careers and lives." I mean it really opened a door for me in terms of thinking and in terms of my own being-in-common with other people.

So one path is AIDS cultural theory, one path is that really sweet story with her, and another path would be various journeys in my own life. My own queer family life or kinship network has been saturated with issues of disability. So those are among the paths that generated that personal work.

DP: It is interesting to me that you structure your answer through paths and relationships that generate your work, rather than as an articulation of a disabled or gay experience or identity. It strikes me that a politics built on such diverse paths and relationships enables crip theory (the book, the theory, and the practices) to explore some of the more complex, overlapping, and/or intersecting aspects of different forms of marginalization, in ways that are not always enabled by identity politics. Do you think this is true of crip theory?

RM: For me that is particularly true of crip theory, and queer theory as well. I think that both forms of thought and cultural practice have often been concerned with thinking the limits. Sure, the LGBT community has pretty clearly defined senses of identity and pride, and so does the disability community. And that's all really important and world making. But I'm also really interested in locations where there may not automatically be the assumption that a person is a member of X, Y, Z community. Or there may even be suspicions about that person's inclusion.

In thinking about crip theory, I've often been concerned with disabilities that are not what have sometimes been cast as "the representative disabilities." So thinking about HIV, and trying to think about that through the lens of disability community and culture, has been really important to me. But also, other kinds of non-visible disabilities have been really important in my thinking and in my work.

In the book *Crip Theory* (2006), I worked and talked a lot with my former partner, who is my family. It was really important, when we talked about our life, to have a picture of him in there, because the picture doesn't really look "predictably disabled." And yet, our lives were shot through, and *are* shot through, with all sorts of intersecting queer, crip, immigrant, and labor issues. So we wanted to capture in this photo—this, sort of, standard tank top gay pride photo—that this is also the face of what it is to be crip and to be an immigrant and a worker, and all those things, even if that is not so obvious without, again, what you name as an understanding of paths and relationships. So, my relationship to crip theory is often concerned with who is at the margins, and with paths to those margins, with who is not necessarily a candidate for the face of the movement.

MB: It also seems vital to think about the ways in which crip theory, as you articulate it in your book, insists that compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory heterosexuality are normative institutions that bear on *all* bodies, not just those interpreted, by themselves and/or others, as queer and/or disabled. In my own teaching of queer and crip theories, I've noticed the real ease with which people who consider themselves "outside" of crip and/or queer cultures (or identities) dismiss the effects these institutions have on their own subjectivities. The danger of this dismissal, as I see it, is that a failure to consider how we are *all* constituted in and through these institutions enables the reinforcement of compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness, and their attendant violences. It seems to me that maintaining a critical stance that focuses on the political implications of marginalization, whilst not always focusing on the marginalized body itself, is an important cultural project—one that the artists you talk about above do through camp and parody, and one that you take on overtly in your book, *Crip Theory*, through your analysis of films like *As Good As It Gets* (Brooks 1997), and television shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003–2007).

Can you tell us what direction your work has been heading in since you published *Crip Theory*?

RM: In the direction of thinking as globally and transnationally as possible. I think that the disability rights movement, often of necessity, has been a very state-based one, around the globe. That has often been because disability has been managed at the level of the state for more than a century. Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell talk about this in *Cultural Locations of Disability* (2006). They talk about how, during the modern era, states were exchanging ideas about how to best “manage” disabled populations. For that reason, disability movements have often struck back at the level of the state and demanded both rights and inclusion at the level of the state. The 1990 U.S. civil rights bill is, of course, the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (emphasis added).

DP: Similarly, in Canada, we can look to the inclusion of Disability into the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which was enacted in 1982.

RM: And that’s all very good, but it brings me back to where crip cultural production is excessive and just cannot be contained by borders. I think of the work of queer-crip filmmakers and painters and performers—like Leroy Moore and Krip Hop Nation, or Sins Invalid out of San Francisco.¹ These are performing artists and groups who centralize the work of disabled people of color, in particular, and Sins Invalid (2010) definitely reaches across borders for what they call their “unashamed claim to beauty in the face of invisibility.” Even the painting of Riva Lehrer,² as she puts forward beautiful and enigmatic portraits of individual disabled activists and artists, often has this sort of queer-crip, moving-across-borders valence to it.

These works are definitely not prioritizing inclusion in the state. Again, as with Loree Erickson, there is this sense of, “Damn, we want so much more than that, and we want to create an overflowing movement out of this desire to spread all this excess around.” And new global affinities have been generated from all that, a sense, for instance, of, “Hey, we have so much in common with disability movements everywhere; we can’t be stopped at, and by, the state.” I’m very interested in that generation of a global queer-crip consciousness, because I think that is in some ways really rather new. It’s so exciting, and it suggests that the movement’s heading in completely unexpected but wonderfully overflowing directions.

MB: You use the term “queer-crip consciousness,” which I think can be understood in a number of different ways. In the current neoliberal context, the concept of political consciousness seems largely grounded in identity politics, which requires one to identify as a particular kind of marginalized subject—“gay” or “disabled” for instance—in order to struggle, collectively, for equal rights within the state (for example, contemporary LGBT movements for gay marriage and inclusion in the military). This identity-based consciousness often effaces how subjects are marginalized in complex and interdependent ways by specific state apparatuses, and by the structures of neoliberal global capitalism. As many have argued, identity-based movements that focus on state inclusion often fail to critique the ways in which buying into normative structures, like marriage or inclusion in the military, might further marginalize and reduce the life chances of some of the most vulnerable members of our communities.³

It seems to me, however, that while you see usefulness in political movements grounded in identity, you’re also trying to get at something quite different in your thinking about a global queer-crip consciousness. I wonder if what you’re talking about here is a kind of consciousness that is in excess of identity categories: a kind of political desire that stems from diverse locations, yet is generated under similar global and state-based constraints, such as neoliberalism and global capitalism?

RM: I’m interested in thinking about global queer-crip movements because I’m writing about neoliberalism, and the generativity of what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri

(2000, 2004) call “the multitude,” which I think queer crip movements are part of this productive and global multitude. Neoliberalism constantly checks and contains and stops bodies and desires at borders, in the interests of safeguarding the free flow of capital. So I’m very interested in thinking through the question of what are the ramifications of the global spread and sedimentation of neoliberalism? What are the ramifications of that for disabled bodies, queer bodies, disabled desires, crip desires and queer desires? So, I’m thinking about that right now, and largely thinking about it in film and filmic representations that are shared across borders.

For example, in an article I’ve written with Nicole Markotić (Markotić and McRuer 2012), via an analysis of *Murderball* (Rubin and Shapiro 2005), we look at the ways in which national borders get reconstituted on the court. They’re made to seem as though they’re so significant in terms of the battle that is being played out: but only on that court, because the relatively privileged players in the film actually cross borders with relative ease.

In contrast, in our article, Nicole and I theorized our own bodies moving across borders, because I almost came to Canada. I was offered a job at the University of Toronto, which would have been great for the partner I was talking about who would have papers much more easily through me in Canada than he does through me in the United States, or doesn’t, as the case may be.

But, ironically, given our conversation thus far, there’s this “excessive demand” clause in The Canadian Immigration and Refugee Protection Act that says if one is deemed to potentially, at some point in the future, be someone who might make excess demands on Canadian health and social services, you might be denied landed immigrancy, or permanent residency.⁴ Maybe . . . might . . . It’s all these “ifs,” right? And the U of T lawyers said, “Well . . . that may in the future apply to you.” And so it was interesting, because I had colleagues on the US side saying, “We don’t want you to leave, but from a queer perspective we can understand how you would go to Canada.” On the Canadian side they’re saying, “We want you to come, but we can understand how from a disability perspective you wouldn’t want to face that question mark.” And so, in the end, we didn’t go.

Margaret Price has this beautiful moment in her book, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (2011), where she defines disability as a kind of reaching across spaces of difference (20)—somewhat akin, I’d say, to the paths and journeys we were talking about earlier. But (and I’m sure Margaret would agree with this), as we reach, or travel, or cross borders, we’re in a moment right now that is particularly dangerous. First, as I just suggested, there’s that obvious moment where some are denied entry. But another, perhaps reverse, danger raises the serious question of cooptation. For instance, a certain “global gay” (usually male and able-bodied) community is clearly catered to now as an identifiable market. And that target marketing, as it first constructs and then capitalizes on the pink dollar/pound/euro, paradoxically encourages the crossing of borders but domesticates all that crip and queer excess we’ve been talking about.

Hence, we constantly need to be as rigorous in our thinking as we are expansive in our sharing: What forces stymie the kind of inventiveness we’ve been discussing? How do movements cross borders in complex and sometimes contradictory ways? What new questions are raised when the issues activists and artists and theorists have been working with at the level of individual states overflow across borders? I hope that the sorts of containments I just gestured toward will be resisted by all of us, in whatever ways we can think of to resist them.

DP: The excessiveness of these crip movements that you describe is particularly interesting to me. You evoke imagery of this creative mobilization spilling out of these

locations of containment, over the borders of states, and across the boundaries of identities and movements. It strikes me that a fruitful way to think about the potential excessiveness of these movements is through the diverse, interrelated, and transnational resistance strategies that have emerged and spilled over within and against common sites of containment.

Take medicine as a site of containment. Feminist, trans, queer, impoverished, and crip communities have all, at various times, come up with really interesting strategies for accessing denied or controlled medical care without having to rely on the state, or at least without having to connect to the state in certain problematic ways. Some of these strategies happened at a more local level than the state (for example, abortion vans, and early independent living movements). Others involved receiving or fighting for care beyond state borders (for example, international trans surgeries, ACT UP). Many of these strategies can be seen as excessive, in that the strategies and their effects spilled over between movements, across bodies and borders, and creatively challenged common sites of containment. Some of these strategies, however, can be seen as antithetical to the kind of excess you describe. For example, both local and international capitalist markets have increased the forms and availability of certain medical interventions (abortions, gender surgeries, treatments), but only for the privileged few with the right income bracket and/or citizenship status.

- RM:** Exactly. We're talking again about open-ended dangers and the multi-faceted workings of cooptation. But, again, in the midst of what Gramsci called our pessimism of the intellect, there is optimism of the will, and what I would term the critically disabled or crip read of neoliberalism that is being communicated transnationally right now reflects that optimism of the will. Whether it's "Wheelers Against Walker," a group in Wisconsin that joined with thousands of other workers resisting Governor Scott Walker's efforts to eliminate collective bargaining rights in the state, or the Hardest Hit March in London, which brought out thousands of disabled people (perhaps the largest disability protest ever) to protest the Tory-Liberal coalition's cuts to vital social services, we could argue that crip responses to local conditions of oppression are animated by a transnational sharing of critical strategies for resistance.
- MB:** You offer these great examples of the "on the street" disability work that we normally associate with activism. Your writing also, however, deals with crip art as a really vital and generative form of disability activism, and as a central component of contemporary crip movements. I wonder, though: what do you think the role of academic theorizing is within the transnational crip movements that you describe?
- RM:** Theory is a form of activism, too. Sometimes there's this sense with theory, like, what do we do with it, right? I think sometimes it's more productively thought of in the other direction: How have all these amazing artistic and political and activist efforts generated these really complex ways of thinking about norms and institutions and structures? It's not like *Crip Theory*, or any other disability text, should be a handbook for a movement. Rather, in some ways, it's a document of all of this energy that has been going for decades at this point, and it's not showing any signs of stopping soon.

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