

Inversion Therapy

Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability. Robert McRuer. New York: New York University Press, 2006. 281 pp.

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<1> Robert McRuer's *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* examines contemporary culture, yet its argument is rooted in the nineteenth century. During that century, the notion of "normal" came to dominate medical and social discourses, and the effects of this shift are still felt today. Lennard J. Davis conducted an extensive study of the rise of "normal," showing that while it was initially a mathematical (statistical) term, in the 1700s it began to denote an idealized bourgeois position. Davis explains:

The average man, the man in the middle, becomes the exemplar of the middle way of life ... [an ideology that] saw the bourgeoisie as rationally placed in the mean position in the great order of things. This ideology can be seen as developing the kind of science that would then justify the notion of a norm. With such thinking, the average then becomes paradoxically a kind of ideal, a position devoutly to be wished.(1)

Davis' analysis is worth quoting at length here because it provides the link between normality and class that undergirds McRuer's book. Although its subtitle identifies the work's focus as "cultural signs of queerness and disability," *Crip Theory* is at heart a critique of neoliberal and capitalist ideologies which construct middle-class, white, straight, and able-bodied as positions devoutly to be wished. Its title could make it seem a "niche" study, but *Crip Theory* is in fact an expansive argument showing that every institutional context, local and global, relies on queerness and disability to support the ways it distributes power and access. Often oppressive, these institutions are also sites where dissent breaks out — or, to use McRuer's phrase, where "crip reality keeps on turning" (63).

<2> McRuer begins by establishing what he calls "crip theory," which exposes the interdependence of heterosexuality, able-bodiedness, and normality — specifically highlighting those liberal notions of normality which purport to resist institutions while actually colluding with them (as in, for example, the supposedly radical push for same-sex marriage). Drawing upon the notion of "compulsory heterosexuality" as developed by Adrienne Rich and further elaborated by Eve Sedgwick, McRuer proposes a corollary, "compulsory able-bodiedness,"

which like compulsory heterosexuality “functions by covering over, with the appearance of choice, a system in which there actually is no choice” (8). Crip theory is an effort to contest the totalizing influence of “normal” as an (often invisible) ideal, and to demonstrate the possibilities for deconstruction that inhere in its institutional appearances. Drawing upon a series of metaphors including rehabilitation/degradation and composition/decomposition, McRuer argues that crip theory offers a way to access a paradoxical, always-moving space in which power may be re-situated, and through which the totalizing influence of the norm can — indeed, must — be continually re-considered. To return to the example of same-sex marriage, crip theory argues that this issue is neither simply radical nor simply assimilationist; rather, an examination of specific contexts, such as the 1980s battle for guardianship between Sharon Kowalski’s parents and life partner, reveals a complicated interplay of resistance, compliance, shifting identities, and unlikely alliances. The recognition *and continual re-consideration* of this interplay is crip theory.

<3> One great weapon of the norm — of compulsory able-bodiedness/heterosexuality — is erasure, or what Donna Haraway calls the “god-trick” of viewing contexts from an unmarked position.⁽²⁾ *Crip Theory* contests this god-trick by conducting what McRuer calls a series of “case studies” of institutional contexts which both demonstrate the hegemonic influence of “normal” in local/global contexts, and also show the ways that persons within these contexts have engaged in resistance (3). Chapter 1, “Coming Out Crip,” establishes McRuer’s strategy of moving rapidly between widely separated sites of study. Beginning with an examination of the 2004 Fourth World Social Forum in Mumbai, India, the analysis quickly shifts to the 1995 conference “This/Ability” at the University of Michigan and resultant documentary film “Vital Signs”; then to the South African HIV Treatment Action Campaign (TAC); to the 2004 reality dating show *The Littlest Groom*; to the Los Angeles-based street gang the Crips; and finally to McRuer’s own home context, which is, he emphasizes, “not a refuge from the convergence of the local and the global” (72), but rather one more queercrip context that “daily engages questions of who we are, who we are not, and who we might become” (75). Referring repeatedly to the much-critiqued metaphor “coming out,” chapter 1 notes that coming out is no simple process of discovery, but rather a repetitive act — or “set of inversions” (70) — that may obfuscate, complicate, and critique, as well as illuminate.

<4> Chapters 2-4 examine institutional contexts including same-sex marriage, global HIV/AIDS politics, and the corporate university, showing how these institutions rely on compulsory able-bodiedness to enforce unmarked definitions of “normal,” and offering examples of the complex resistances occurring therein. Particularly intriguing is McRuer’s analysis of the 1996 documentary film *The Transformation*, which he discusses at length to expand existing understandings of rehabilitation/degradation. *The Transformation* focuses on the story of Sara/Ricardo, a Cuban American who was once a drag queen living in the Salt Mines of New York City, but who subsequently “transformed” into Ricardo and joined an evangelical Christian church. Ricardo’s church viewed this as a rehabilitation story of a person (re-)joining “his” proper gender; however, McRuer vastly complicates the possibilities for what “rehabilitation” might mean, pointing out that while one could read Ricardo’s decisions as collusion with “Fundamentalism, heterosexual marriage, and linguistic and gender conformity,” it would be just as easy to attribute them to the need for access to health care and a place to live (120). Sara/Ricardo is HIV-positive in the film, and subsequently died from complications due to HIV/

AIDS. Importantly, McRuer does not treat Sara/Ricardo's story in isolation, but juxtaposes it with an analysis of the larger institutions acting upon her representation. For example, McRuer points out that 1996 was an "upbeat" year in HIV/AIDS research, according to popular media such as *Time*, but that access to AIDS treatments in that year was (and still is) "consistently more difficult for queer men of color" (108). Refusing to read the story of Sara/Ricardo as a simple transformation, McRuer exposes the complex forces of access, disability, race, and class that infuse it, and ultimately argues that "Sara conceived and put into motion who she would be" (123). This is no happy conversion story, nor is it a simple resistance story; it is a queercrip story, constantly qualified and continually in motion.

<5> *Crip Theory* both draws upon, and offers a corrective to, existing research in disability studies. For example, in chapter 5, McRuer critiques an article by the influential disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, arguing that her way of analyzing visual texts implies a "progress narrative" (179), and calling for recognition of the hegemonic power of supposedly realistic images. Drawing upon words and images of Bob Flanagan, a self-described "supermasochist" and subject of the documentary film *Sick* (1997), McRuer shows that, far from being "ordinary" and "typical," Flanagan's survival depends upon his very "sickness" — not just his status as a disabled person, but also his joyful practice of BDSM and paradoxical ability to find pleasure in pain, and strength in submission.(3)

<6> *Crip Theory* is a huge and groundbreaking work. Although I have some concerns about its methodology, these are more on the order of hopes for further exploration than refutations. One methodological issue is how McRuer intends to operationalize "queer." At times, as in his discussion of Black men's sexualities, distinctions between "gay" and "queer" seem mushy, and not always in ways that usefully "queer" the conventional thirst for clear boundaries, but rather seem to co-opt the subjects they describe. Another issue is that of selection: how were McRuer's "case studies" selected, and why do they privilege the positions they do? My own position, as a queer disabled femme, informs the omissions of the queer female body that I perceive in *Crip Theory*. ("Female" is a deeply vexed term; in using it imperfectly here, I do not wish to take "female" away from genderqueer women, such as Sara of *The Transformation*, nor to thrust it upon those who have been labeled "female" but would not label themselves as such.) As I read the book, it seemed to me that appearances by queer females, femmes, and transmen were disproportionately few. The exception is the Kowalski/Thompson case, which is examined largely in the context of civil and domestic rights. Because McRuer's study is of contemporary culture, to some extent it replicates that culture's valorization of the queer male body, in examples including the *Queer Eye* "Fab Five," Marlon Riggs, Gary Fisher, Bob Flanagan, and the familiar fascination with drag queens as spectacle. Yet it is worth noting that prominent theorists of female masculinity and transmasculinity, including Judith Halberstam and Patrick Califia, are discussed briefly or not at all, and that butch/femme politics are relegated to one parenthetical mention.

<7> My critique is less an argument with what *Crip Theory* contains than a concern about the future of queercrip studies: now that McRuer has opened the field, which bodies will be privileged, which marginalized, and how will we read our multifarious stories of rehabilitation/degradation, of compliance/resistance? Thus I both invoke and affirm McRuer's own assertion that crip theory never "arrives," but rather must keep on turning. In BDSM parlance — and

quoting McRuer's own lighthearted commentary on Flanagan — I am compelled to say “More, please.”

Endnotes

(1)Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London and New York: Verso, 1995) 26-7.(^)

(2)Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 189.(^)

(3)Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Seeing the Disabled: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography,” in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, ed. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 2001) 373.(^)