Differing Bodyminds: Setting the Scene For Crip Studies in the Low Countries
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Introducing novel ideas in uncharted territory is always a challenging undertaking. The more provocative such ideas are, the higher obstacles can be expected. Disability scholars Leni Van Goidsenhoven and Gert-Jan Vanaken experienced this dynamic when writing a Dutch Wikipedia-entry for the term ‘crip’, somewhere in the beginning of 2021. Given some early artistic and academic engagements with the term in Belgium and the Netherlands, the time seemed ripe to pave the way for a more established position of crip and crip theory in our so-called Low Countries. ‘Short for cripple, crip is a term which has been re-appropriated by disabled and chronically ill people’, so they aimed to describe it in the entry. ‘Claiming to be crip should be read as an effort to embrace abject bodies and resisting the societal exclusion based on the constructed binary between desirable, abled bodies and undesirable, disabled ones’.

However, the entry never got published in its original form. Wikipedia-gatekeepers labeled it as an ‘overly activist text’ for a term which ‘was hardly used in Dutch-speaking settings’, involving ‘post-modern “oracle language”, which would ‘only be relevant for a small minority of disabled people’. This discouraging experience put forward some poignant questions. How does socially engaged academic work relate to activism? When is a set of ideas sufficiently established to be discussed in more mainstream settings? Is disability theorizing indeed only relevant for disabled people?

A crip time and place
Differing Bodyminds – Choreographing New Pathways, the first official event on crip theory in Flanders, precisely sought to address and further dissect these questions that have been raised by a burgeoning artistic, academic and activist engagement with crip theory in Dutch-speaking regions. Having worked extensively with crip perspectives before, literary scholar and cultural theorist Leni Van Goidsenhoven (UA NeuroEpigenEthics), together with dance and performance scholar Jonas Rutgeerts (Cultural Studies KUL), brought three international and influential voices in the domain of crip theory to Belgium. Carrie Sandahl, Robert McRuer, and Jane Gallop gathered with a diverse group of (dance) scholars, practitioners, activists and students to explore the conceptual and methodological possibilities opened up by crip theory. For the set-up of the symposium (19 April) and subsequent doctoral school (20-21 April), the organizing members of KU Leuven’s Cultural Studies department and Antwerp University’s NeuroEpigenEthics research group in collaboration with international arts center STUK departed from the frame of contemporary dance: a field where bodies generally tend to appear as able, slim and supple. The aim was to surpass these ableist assumptions and adopt the contemporary (performing) arts as a realm for anchoring three days of theorizing in embodied and experiential forms of knowledge-making, ‘choreographing new pathways’ for crip bodyminds in research and (art) practice.
Two years of rescheduling added an ambiguous timeliness and urgency to the event. It has been said that over the months spent in isolation, the masses had gotten a glimpse of what it means to experience ‘crip time’: the uncertainty and unpredictability of the moment affecting everyone, regardless of disability. Invitee Carrie Sandahl, whose research and dramaturgical practice is concerned with the creation of disability (performance) art, contests this overly simplified parallel and prefers to identify the past few years as “crip time in pandemic time”. This approach provides a layered entrypoint into understanding how crip time takes part in setting out new ways of meaning-making: crip performance as cripistemology.

Temporality was also pivotal to the talks of the other two invited speakers. Feminist literary scholar Jane Gallop’s discussion centred on the queering of a linear progression of sexuality, specifically through theorizing from her own crip experience as a sexual being with late onset disability. Bringing sex(y) back to disability studies, Gallop transported crip time to crip over time. Notions such as the ‘not-yet disabled’ or ‘temporarily-abled’ acknowledge the intersection of disability with aging, which also goes against the life course perpetually reinstated by neoliberalist capitalism. Likewise, theorist of crip cultural studies Robert McRuer highlighted the entanglement of disability with larger shaping structures such as austerity measures and neoliberalism in this current moment. These are the ‘Crip Times’ that he unfolds within his book of the same name (2018). The ongoing impact of austerity politics onto the crip community becomes visible within the frequent association of crip pacing with taking (more) time. This stands in stark contrast with, for example, the reality of one of the disabled artists with whom McRuer collaborated, Christopher “Unpezverde” Núñez. Instead of slowing down,
McRuer discussed how Núñez worked 20 hours a day to make ends meet: an indication of the various crip temporalities that remain invisible, obscured by smokescreens.

The common ground that shimmered through in the talks and working sessions was the alliance between the queer and the crip, whilst simultaneously recognizing its discordancess. All three speakers shared a breaking down of categories, such as ‘disability’ and ‘neurodiversity’, from a queer angle. This adds an active undertone to the concept of ‘crip’, that then can actually take up a verb-like agency to crip, similar to the destabilizing intent of ‘queering’. Just as ‘queer’, ‘cripping’ moves beyond its use as an identity label or marker and elucidates active ways of thinking through alterlivability and world-making. Taken up by the audience just as much as the invited speakers, this made the three days spent together into a moment prompted by crip collectivity, striving towards not just disability rights but disability justice.

**PART II**

**Crip world-making**

Jane Gallop’s presentation at the symposium started off by highlighting the ongoing relevancy of queer theorist Eve Sedgwick’s minoritizing/universalizing binary from *Epistomology of the Closet* (1990). Whereas it is generally agreed that taking disability into account goes beyond the interest of a selective minority, she also argued that it can be incredibly productive to delineate ‘the disabled’ from ‘the able-bodied’, for example when advocating for disability rights. What Gallop intended to clarify here, is that the intention is not to completely resolve the contradiction, but to think with it. This thinking with, rather than against, is the essence of her project to anecdotalize theory, theorizing from situations and positions that go against the grain. Although handled slightly differently, it approximates McRuer’s approach of crip theory as a particular mode of doing disability studies in conversation with queer theory and the arts: lived experience confirmed. It implies, in other words, carefully paying attention to and accommodating the paradoxical potential that is part and parcel of working both with and against established disability identities, representations, and rights.

Within his assertion of crip theory as a particular mode of doing disability studies, McRuer hinted at the generative world-making potential of crip. Crip is therefore, according to him, not just a theoretical perspective; it is also urgently activist. Sandahl chimed in on this view that crip worldmaking is, even more significantly than Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s queer worldmaking (1998), concerned with the concrete. Crip worldmaking entails the literal reshaping of spaces, imagining a wider variety of (differing) bodyminds in these spaces. One such example of crip worldmaking was Sandahl’s own presence in the event through Zoom: as such, she presented a way of making an impact that did not stand in the way of responsibilities, risks and restrictions that go hand in hand with the often precarious situation of taking care of an impairment and a family.
Where Gallop and McRuer mostly explored, expanded and tied together key terms and concepts in crip studies (crip, cripping, queering), Sandahl applied these definitions to art-making practices. She proposed to look at crip not only as a noun, a verb, and an analytical mode, but also as a dramaturgical tool. From her position as a dramaturg, closely working together with a wide variety of artists, she spoke extensively about her crip dramaturgical practice. With great care and creativity, she aims to use methodologies that actually center disability phenomenology. Instead of fostering an orientation that talks back to the mainstream, she argued, it is crucial to focalize disabled people themselves and their movement vocabularies. Guided by the questions of the seminar participants and concrete examples from her dramaturgical practice, Sandhal discussed the emotional and physical experience of impairment, proprioception, crip time, space, narratives, disability culture and community. One of her main points that resonated strongly with the group was her plea for building access and accommodations into a creation or a piece from the beginning, rather than merely as an add-on.

However, creating crip performances does not come without hurdles. In order to shed a nuanced light on this, Sandahl introduced the term representational conundrum, a conundrum that was - although more implicit - as much key to the paradigms in which Gallop and McRuer operated. The transition of wheelchair athlete Kris Lenzo to contemporary dance creation, as Sandahl unpacked, asks the question of how to ‘dance disability’ as an aging dancer without disabling oneself. How do you, in other words, develop a sustainable choreography? In another case about blind sound artist Andy Slater, similar conundrums arose in the set-up of an exhibition. How do we share sensory experiences in an inter-impairment setting?
So, “if it takes at least two people to make a crip”, one can’t help but take the complexity of said crip collectivity into account. What if these two people have very different and, maybe even opposing, needs? It reminded one of the authors of this piece of what Kenian writer and theater maker Ogutu Muraya noted during his keynote lecture at a conference the week after *Differing Bodyminds*: we should not reduce ‘complex’ to ‘complicated’. Unexpectedly, Muraya’s keynote reverberated with the contents of the event under review. What Sandahl advocates for is, indeed, carefully attending to complexity, rather than fixating on finding a straightforward answer or a solution. The experiences she shared as a dramaturg who tends to be wary of narratives of ‘overcoming’ disability, attested exactly of that. What if that overcoming-narrative is what works for an artist, because it is what society wants to pay for? What if that is what results in success, in making a living? Speaking from her own personal experiences, she likewise opened up about being in essence against institutionalization, yet coming to terms with the fact that, at some times, she needs it as well. An important aspect that crip thinking introduces therefore also points towards documenting one’s own evolving stances.

**Living through the crip conundrum**

The accessibility of academia was first touched upon within McRuer’s discussion of the anglocentrism of disability studies, which asked about the implications of the hegemony of the English language for the accessibility of the field. The fact that academic conventions often remain hermetic despite attempts at broadening their horizon, points towards the performativity behind academic format’s installment of a normative script. Jane Gallop’s methodology hinges onto the performative process of producing theory: working anecdotally, by theorizing from the personal anecdote, from the marginal, opens up towards theory anchored in an actual lived crip experience. The question of “who has the access and possibility to do so?” resurfaced at various points throughout the seminar though, which led the group towards elaborate ponderings on what a crip(ped) academia would look like.

But, also on a less abstract level, we - as participants, organizers, and speakers - found ourselves faced with and living through the crip conundrum, negotiating a disability space where voicing one’s needs did not necessarily meet the other’s. A literal space and place that, in contrast to expectations, did not entirely live up to its promise of accessibility, or confusing moments where we wondered how to continue while recognizing the inevitable flaws of our practices, made us aware of the cracks in criping. It showed how choreographing new ways through undoing the illusory smooth surface of crip theory as a ready-made solution might turn it into an even rockier road. At the end of the day, the generative tension between art, academia and activism that lingered in the room heightened an awareness of the range of roles we take on in different contexts, much in the way Sandahl grounded her own positionality, and how a certain flexibility within that can assist in focussing on the attainable, criping our own (yet shared) m².

Taking in the meta-situation was equally enriching from the perspective of future directions for a continued exploration of crip theory. This especially emerged within the afterthoughts exchanged in the corridors and the laughter shared over lunch and drinks in the sun. It struck us, for example, how much the speakers had focussed on crip in relation to classic formats of art, the live performing arts, and related forms of text creation, and how little there had been said about the shift social media must have brought about for the crip community. Yet, being introduced to the very vivid TikTok hashtag #hotistic in between the lines of the event by a fellow participant shows how lived crip
experience functions in tandem with more established discourses. In reality, as became clear through shared personal stories, crip, neurodivergent, and queer perspectives must not only be combined to create new alliances, but already flow through each other in daily life as experienced by the participants.

**A crip critical lens**

The wide-ranging, passionate and even destabilizing food for thought that erupted from the time spent within the context of *Differing Bodyminds* mainly solidified crip’s potential as a critical lens through which we can evaluate any phenomenon and look at how it functions in order to uphold or challenge normalcy. A significant part of crip’s value clearly resides in how it transcends its use as a mere identity marker. Beyond an identification as crip, crip theory allows to crip established perspectives, as a thought experiment, entering a state of vulnerability where you are willingly taking on an outsider perspective. Crip theory leaves an opening for ‘not getting it right’, a collective experience that we all had a taste of. By facilitating an encounter with crip theory in the flesh, thinking with disability rather than around it, perforating the expected and desired, this event most certainly made a crucial contribution to a world where crip’s presence on Wikipedia is beyond dispute.

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