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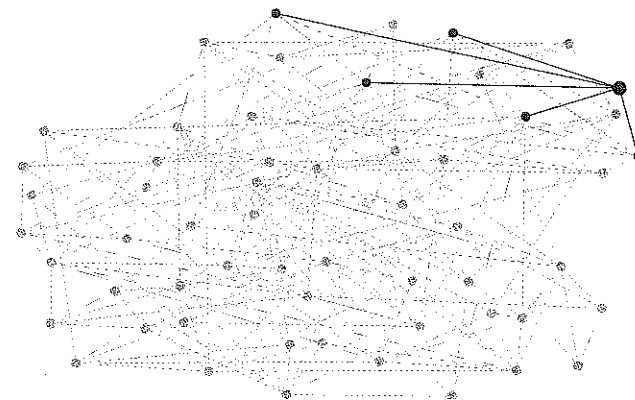
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**KEYWORDS FOR RADICALS**

**THE CONTESTED VOCABULARY OF  
LATE-CAPITALIST STRUGGLE**

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## CRIP

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LIKE THE WORD "QUEER," "CRIP" HAS HAD A LONG AND variegated history. For almost two decades, it has been a recognizable term within the academic field of Disability Studies, generally marking (as "queer" did in relation to LGBT) a more radical alternative to an assimilationist or reformist disability politics. Long before it was an acknowledged word in the academy, however, disabled activists and artists used it to mark a flamboyant sense of collective identity characterized by both defiance against able-bodied norms and often by what Carrie Sandahl identifies as "wicked humor, including camp" (2003, 37). In the United States, "crip" has also had a parallel, racialized history, signifying inclusion in a prominent African American gang.

The degree of overlap between these two uses depends in part upon how the history or mythology of the gang name is narrated.

“Crip” is derived from the English word “cripple,” which has more than a thousand-year history as both a noun and verb. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the noun—meaning “one who is disabled (either from birth, or by accident or injury) from the use of his limbs; a lame person”—dates from 950; the verb—meaning “to deprive (wholly or partly) of the use of one’s limbs; to lame, disable, make a cripple of”—dates from 1307. The *OED* cites Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens* (1607), where Timon himself uses the word as a curse: “Thou cold sciatica, Cripple our senators, that their limbs may halt as lamely as their manners!” For much of the word’s history, the noun “cripple” has been deployed as a harsher, more demeaning, or pitiful version of words perceived to be more neutral (like “impaired,” “handicapped,” or “disabled”). The *OED* includes, for example, an 1865 usage from Anthony Trollope describing “a poor cripple, unable to walk beyond the limits of her own garden.” In our own moment, “cripple” (especially as a verb) continues to circulate freely as a negative metaphor to describe virtually any natural catastrophe. Following a devastating earthquake on April 26, 2015, for example, MSN and other news outlets quickly reported that “Nepal’s Earthquake Could Cripple Its Vital Tourism Economy.”

“Crip” will always carry traces of this painful history of stigma and derision. In the face of this pain, however, “crip” has been reclaimed. Collective reclamations of words are never simplistic reversals. They do not offer a one-to-one replacement (a singular positive meaning for a singular negative one). Instead, as collective revaluations, they simultaneously allow for the germination of multiple, unexpected meanings that can be “worldmaking” (Muñoz 1999, 195).

As a term, “disability” itself has been reclaimed. If, in the past, it automatically connoted loss, lack, or exclusion, it can now mark an identity or inclusion in disability culture. Even more than “disability,” however, “crip” has become the marker of an out-and-proud cultural model of disability (Snyder and Mitchell 2006, 5). This model stands in opposition both to medical models (which reduce disability to pathology, diagnosis, and treatment/elimination) and

to the well-known social model (which suggests that “disability” is located not in bodies but rather in inaccessible environments requiring adaptation). The flamboyant defiance of “crip” ties it to models of disability that are more culturally generative (and politically radical) than a merely reformist social model.

Since disability haunts many stories of the gang name’s origins, the LA Crips are not absolutely autonomous from this history. There are many origin stories for the LA Crips, and several are likely apocryphal. In a 1988 report, the *Los Angeles Times* captured the role of rumor in this history: “Some said they wore earrings. Some said they carried canes. Some said they walked with a limp, like cripples. The nickname spread: Crips” (“Modern Gangs”). In 1992, the *Guardian* more directly tied the gang’s name to a person, suggesting that Raymond Washington, who founded the Crips in 1969, was himself disabled: “Crip is an abbreviation for cripple, nickname of the gang’s founder, who walked with a limp” (Martin Walker 1992, 21). Over the past four decades, numerous other accounts have confirmed, contradicted, proliferated, and (perhaps most importantly) disseminated these stories.

Some stories of the gang name’s origin suggest that it was an acronym for either “Continuous Revolution in Progress” or “Community Resources for Independent People”; others suggest that these acronyms emerged only later to explain the name. Nevertheless, media accounts of the gang often point either to a way of walking *as though* impaired or as *definitely* impaired. In these accounts, “crip” marks either a stylized way of walking or a way of walking necessitated by mobility impairments. The fact that canes are sometimes part of these stories substantiates the spectral disability histories connected to the gang’s origins. It is in no way apocryphal, however, that—at some moments (as when a truce was signed with the rival LA Bloods following the 1992 riots)—the Crips have explicitly focused on issues directly linked to disability, such as community health care clinics or HIV/AIDS services. As part of the 1992 truce, the Crips promised to match funds for an HIV/AIDS awareness center that would be operated by minority researchers and physicians (Browning 1998, 108).

Although the historical connections of “crip” to “cripple” seem to tie the term to mobility impairment, it has proven to be far more flexible. A set of two special issues of the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* (2014) focusing on “Cripistemologies” (a term coined by Merri-Lisa Johnson), position “crip” as describing non-normative or non-representative disabilities. The essays focus on borderline personality, anxiety, hysteria, chronic pain, HIV/AIDS, trans identity, and a range of other impairments or states of being not comprehended by the signifier “disability.” Likewise, throughout her important *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Alison Kafer (2013) uses the term to think about issues, mental states, behaviors, or forms of embodiment that might not, on the surface, appear to be about disability at all. For Kafer, “crip” has the capacity to encompass forms of embodiment or states of mind that are arguably in excess of the able-minded or able-bodied/disabled binary. Like “queer” at its most radical, “crip” has the potential to be simultaneously flamboyantly identitarian (as in, “We are crip and you will acknowledge that!”) and flamboyantly anti-identitarian (as in, “We reject the capacity of your ableist categories to describe us!”) (cf. Duggan 1995, 171). In *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, I wrote that “crip” should be “permanently and desirably contingent: in other queer, crip, and queercrip contexts, squint-eyed, half dead, not dead yet, gimp, freak, crazy, mad, or diseased pariah have served, or might serve, similar generative functions” (2006, 40, 41). Both *Crip Theory* and *Feminist, Queer, Crip* trace the term’s emergence from activist and artistic locations.

Artist and activist Eli Clare has also written thoughtfully about “crip.” In *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation*, Clare explicitly uses the first-person plural to explain how “we in the disability rights movement create crip culture, tell crip jokes, identify a sensibility we call crip humor” (1999, 68). For Clare, creative deployments of “crip” differentiate it from the more individualistic “supercrip.” Supercrips have often been critiqued for participating in ableist “overcoming” narratives, as though disability represented an adversity over which one must “triumph” (through athletic competition or daring adventures, for example).

Both Clare and Sandahl appeared with numerous other artists in David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder’s groundbreaking 1995 documentary *Vital Signs: Crip Culture Talks Back*, with the very title suggesting that “crip” is connected to community, solidarity, outspokenness, and defiance. “Crip,” in all of these senses, has not been contained to the United States. In the United Kingdom, the cartoonist Crippen has generated biting critiques of ableist ideas and performer Liz Carr has created “crip radio” through a podcast called “Ouch!” available on the BBC’s disability website (O’Hara 2006). In Australia, comedian and disability activist Stella Young produced a comedy performance called “Tales from the Crip” aimed at affirming disabled people’s sexuality while mocking ableist notions that disabled people should be “inspirational” (she even wore a T-shirt that read “Inspiration Boner Killer”). “I identify with the crip community,” Young said in an interview. “I didn’t invent the word—it’s a political ideology I came to in my late teens and early 20s. People often say to me ‘You can’t say that!’ and I say, ‘Well, my people have been saying it for decades so I reckon I probably can’” (Northover 2014).

Back in the United States, Mike Ervin has blogged as “Smart Ass Cripple” since 2010 on the “official site for bitter cripples (and those who love them).” For his part, Leroy Moore has invented an African American, disabled, and genderqueer cultural form called Krip-Hop—with the K marking a distance from the C of the LA Crips. Aiming to bring hip-hop artists and poets with disabilities to a wider audience, Krip-Hop has been integrated into some of the performances of Sins Invalid, a troupe celebrating the beauty, desirability, and diversity of queer and disabled people of color.

Usage of the term as an adjective in cases such as these underscores its generative character: when combined with a noun, “crip” as adjective is not simply additive. Describing something like culture as “crip” remakes the substance in question: “crip culture” is not simply crip + culture (as if we all agreed in advance what the latter term might mean). In the same ways that “crip” as noun does not simplistically mark a form of existence that can be known in advance, “crip” as adjective cannot be reduced to a mere descriptor.

The term's power when used as a verb emanates from its uses as a noun or adjective. Queer disability theorist Mel Chen has written about "animacy," which describes the degree of "liveness" associated with an entity or term. For Chen, "a queer-crip approach to disability" is marked by a "disentangling of the discourses . . . that contain and fix dis/abled bodies" (2012, 215). Whether as noun, adjective, or verb, such animacy is evident in "crip."

We are still collectively discovering what it might mean "to crip." As a verb, the term is still perhaps best defined by what it might become. Two important conferences in Prague—Crippling Neoliberalism in 2010 and Crippling Development in 2013—implied in their titles that "cripping" entails radically revisioning, from committed anti-ableist positions, the taken-for-granted systems in which we are located. Both conferences interrogated fetishized notions of capitalist growth and highlighted how bodies and minds are unevenly caught up in global processes. Similarly, the location of these conferences outside of the United States or western Europe indicated a desire to find new languages for thinking about disability in the Global South or in post-socialist countries.

"Crip" has, at this point, moved in and out of various languages. One of the first special issues of an academic journal on crip theory was a bilingual (English and Swedish) publication out of Sweden, *lambda nordica* ("Crip-teori"). The anticapitalist *Crip Magazine* out of Vienna, Austria, was also bilingual (English and German). "Crip" resonates strongly with some radical queer and disability activists in Spanish-speaking and German-speaking locations as well (in German, the contemporary history of "crip" partially intersects with the longer history of the *Krüppel* movement, although the ways the term currently travels seem to be semi-autonomous). In Spain, Melania Moscoso has begun to talk about "cripwashing" as a complicated process of domesticating radical disabled energy by using the very language of disability activism (2013, 170). Theorizing similar appropriations in a Czech context, Kateřina Kolářová uses the idea of "the inarticulate post-socialist crip" to describe impaired or disabled modes of being silenced by neoliberal appropriations of disability (2014, 257).

"To crip," like "to queer," gets at processes that unsettle and make strange or twisted (Kuppers 2011). "Crippling" also exposes the ways that able-bodiedness and able-mindedness get naturalized, and the ways that bodies, minds, and impairments that should be at the center of a space, issue, or discussion get purged. Such purging has tended to be in the service of a globalized neoliberal capitalism, which is one reason that "crip" has had such resonance for radicals.

When AIDS activists protested outside New York's Trump Tower in 1989, they sought to expose the ways that dominant meanings of development, housing, luxury, or the good life actually *depended upon* eviction, homelessness, and literal death. Trump received massive tax abatements to construct his towers, while activists calling for housing to keep people with HIV/AIDS from dying in the streets saw their applications for hospice care languish in the mayor's office (Crimp 1990, 122). We might retrospectively term this action "cripping" and identify its affinity with later cultural work—not simply for its linguistic, deconstructive maneuver, but also for its insistent focus on the materiality of impaired bodies and minds caught up in, or purged from, unjust systems.

"Crippling," then, always attends to the materiality of embodiment at the same time that it attends to how spaces, issues, or discussions get "straightened"—though it does so in a more expansive sense than we might think of "straightening" in queer studies, activism, or art. This is in part because the radical power of "queer" has been diluted by global commodification processes that have not yet domesticated "crip." For radicals, "crip" is a keyword that currently connects to what many have begun to call "disability justice" (Mingus 2010a). Disability justice moves beyond mere rights-based and nation-state-based strategies (represented most prominently by the Americans with Disabilities Act). It also forges anti-neoliberal coalitions in the interests of a global crip imagination, which can invent new ways of countering oppression and generate new forms of being-in-common.

SEE ALSO: Accessible; Bodies; Queer; Rights; Trans\*/-