

BOOK REVIEW

Crip Theory. Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability

ROBERT McRUER

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During the last decade or so, American disability studies have furthered their positions and are, I would say, one of the most interesting areas within international disability studies today. Robert McRuer's book *Crip Theory* is certainly a part of this movement. Aiming to show the intersections between able-bodiedness and heterosexuality, and, as a consequence, the fruitfulness of cross-fertilizing disability and queer studies, Rob McRuer offers us a fresh piece of thoughts on how to theorize disability.

The book consists of five chapters, together with an introduction and epilogue. In the introduction, McRuer sketches his main thoughts on how disability and queer intersect, using the five main chapters as different case studies on how this intersection is represented in different materials, both fiction and non-fiction. Earlier versions and portions of two of the chapters and the introduction have been published before. This tends to fragment the book, something I will come back to later.

A focal point in McRuer's book is that the construction of queer and disabled people as certain categories follows the same logic. Both are deviating from the highly celebrated norm of being "normal". Certainly, that is neither a new nor a revolutionary thought. But McRuer sees a strong connection between these two categories. First, they have both provided a critique of normalcy, revealing its constructionist basis. Second, ability and heterosexuality, which are the logics from which disability and queer occur as deviations, are themselves rather difficult to define. They both constitute normality, meaning that what have been defined are the deviations *from* it. McRuer demonstrates this in different ways, for example by showing how ability and heterosexuality is lexically defined. He states that both heterosexuality and ability are mostly defined by what it is not, e.g. ability is defined as free from disability.

The invisibility of heterosexuality has been noticed by queer theorists and McRuer tries to give us disability scholars the same kind of awakening vis-à-vis ability. A third connection that McRuer points to is the compulsory nature of both heterosexuality and ability: both conditions are regarded as the most desirable way of being. Homosexuality and disability are not questions of

choice; rather they are a kind of unfortunate state of being. But McRuer does not only pinpoint the similarities, he also thinks of heterosexuality and able-bodiedness as intertwined. McRuer could be clearer on this point but he seems to think that heterosexuality can be achieved only through able-bodiedness. Thus one may think of ability as a pre-condition of heterosexuality. One of McRuer's attempts to show this connection is through an analysis of the comedy *As Good As It Gets*. In this movie, the character Melvin (played by Jack Nicholson) has some severe behaviour problems, consisting of an obsessive-compulsive disorder combined with profound meanness, and is outspoken with all kinds of racist, sexist and other detrimental comments. However, when he falls in love with the character Carol (played by Helen Hunt) he feels a strong urge to treat his disorder and behavioural problem in order to get Carol. Thus, he has to become *able*. This is, according to McRuer, an illustration of the strong connection between ability and heterosexuality, stating that Melvin's "[a]ble-bodied status is achieved in direct proportion to his increasing awareness of, and need for, (heterosexual) romance" (p. 24).

McRuer puts a certain emphasis on the construction of the binary disabled/non-disabled. While traditional disability research studies foremost have focused on *the disabled*, McRuer tries to move the gaze from the disabled to the question of how this category is defined. Once again, this is not an original thought; you can find it in early texts on disability, in which the binary is replaced with a notion of disability as a continuum. However, McRuer focuses more on the construction of the non-disabled than earlier scholars have done. In this respect McRuer continues similar thoughts developed by e.g. Rosemarie Garland Thomson and Lennard Davis, and in his analysis of the construction of compulsory able-bodiedness McRuer is strongly attracted to queer theory and its works on how heterosexuality is constructed and how the norm of heterosexuality is shaping our society.

The title of the book, *Crip Theory*, is a bit misleading. McRuer's book is not an introduction to a new theory; you will not find a consolidated and fixed theory in this book. Rather, McRuer seems to think of crip theory not as a fixed and delimited field but as a collection of positions, practices and perspectives against compulsory able-bodiedness, compulsory heterosexuality, and their intersections. Even if such an open and inclusive approach makes it rather difficult to delimitate crip theory as a certain way of thinking, there are some traces in McRuer's book that seem to, taken together, build some kind of inner core of crip theory. I have already mentioned the close connection between heterosexuality and able-bodiedness, in which the latter is a pre-condition of the former. Another trace is the focus shift from the disabled to the construction of the abled and able-bodiedness. Another trace is the relationship between crip theory and "traditional" disability studies. McRuer states that "crip theory [...] should be understood as having a similar contestatory relationship to disability studies and identity that queer theory has to LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender; reviewer's note] studies and identity [...]" (p. 35). Thus, McRuer's definition of crip has several similarities to queer. While LGBT studies acknowledge discrete

categories such as “homosexual” and “bisexual”, and focus their research on such categories, queer is more suspicious towards such kind of discrete categories, but is also more inclusive. It is, for example, possible for non-heteronormative straights to label themselves queer, which is trickier when using discrete categories as homosexuals, bisexuals and heterosexuals. Queer theory in general, therefore, has a more fluid concept of sexual desires. McRuer argues that crip can be used in a similar way, implying that the distinction between abled and disabled will be decomposed. Also, this includes the possibility for non-disabled to be crip. As such, crip is more of a position against able-bodiedness than it is a certain and discrete category of people.

McRuer’s book tries to cover a broad range of fields, issues, and earlier research on both disability and queer. Combined with McRuer’s ambition to sketch out a new but loose theoretical position within the field of disability, this makes his book rather fragmentary. The main thread does not appear clearly all the time, and the American talkativeness that characterizes the book does not make it easy to get a firm grip on crip theory. Despite that, I am very attracted to McRuer’s new thoughts on disability theory and I certainly hope that many disability scholars will not only read his book and be inspired to apply his thoughts to their own research, but also to further develop crip theory as a theoretical position.

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