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Toward a Crip-of-Color Critique: Thinking with Minich's 'Enabling Whom?'

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ABSTRACT Response to Julie Avril Minich, "Enabling Whom? Critical Disability Studies Now," published in Lateral 5.1. Kim elaborates upon a crip-of-color critique, which has possibilities to both criticize structures that inherently devalue humans and to take action to work toward justice. Kim's final call is to identify and act against the inequalities and harm of academic labor, urging readers to take seriously a "politics of refusal" that might help academics of color survive through alternative collectivities.

In her essay "A Burst of Light: Living with Cancer," writer-activist Audre Lorde positions disability and illness within ongoing struggles for racial justice: "Racism. Cancer. In both cases, to win the aggressor must conquer, but the resisters need only survive. How do I define that survival and on whose terms?"[1] I begin with this quote because for me, it exemplifies the kind of critical analytic that Julie Avril Minich imagines as a future horizon for disability studies. Minich's "Enabling Whom?" theorizes a disability methodology not attuned to the same questions of representation and legibility—what can currently be recognized *as* disability—but rather to the systemic de-valuation (and oftentimes, subsequent disablement) of non-normative bodies and minds. Akin to Kandice Chuh's formulation of "subjectless critique,"[2] Minich's conceptual move orients the field to its "mode of analysis rather than its objects of study," shifting disability from *noun*—an identity one can occupy—to *verb*: a critical methodology.[3]

In this response piece, I want to draw out some of the possibilities for coalition between women-of-color / queer-of-color feminist and disability theorizing, an alliance I and others have termed a crip-of-color critique.[4] I view Lorde's essay as an ideal point of entry for this enterprise. Presaging Minich's methodology, "A Burst of Light" brings into relief the intimate entanglements of race and disability unrecognizable under many of disability studies' dominant rubrics. Lorde, as Minich puts it, invites scrutiny of the "social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations," or in this context, the disproportionate production of cancer within racialized and economically distressed communities.[5] For Lorde, cancer is not an individual property limited to and contained by her body's boundaries, but an extension of the state-sanctioned and extralegal systems that seek to delimit, contain, and exploit black life. This, to me, is a critical disability methodology: a mode of analysis that urges us to hold racism, illness, and disability together, to see them as antagonists in a shared struggle, and to generate a poetics of survival from that nexus.

Disability as methodology, too, prompts us to track the resonances across anti-racist, anti-capitalist, feminist, queer, and disability politics. Indeed, Minich calls for "a more capacious recognition of the activist movements to which disability scholars should be

accountable."[6] A critical disability methodology would thus radiate our scholarship outward from the single-issue terrain of disability identity, an expansion already occurring in the arenas of Disability Justice and crip theory,[7] and toward what women of color feminists have called "coalition through difference."[8] In this way, "Enabling Whom?" parallels Cathy Cohen's intervention in the groundbreaking "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," which envisioned a queer politics where "one's relation to [dominant] power, and not some homogenized identity, is privileged in determining one's political comrades."[9] Just as Cohen complicated our understandings of "both heteronormativity and queerness" in the interest of "radical coalition work," emphasizing an intersectional analysis attuned to the disciplinary operations of heteronormative power,[10] so too does Minich disrupt our given understandings of disability—which have largely centered whiteness—in order to build more robust relationships with and across identity categories.[11] But what would these connections and coalitions look like, and what would they entail? What new modes of disability analysis and organizing could emerge from these intersections?[12]

To respond, I want to briefly expand upon crip-of-color critique as critical methodology, which draws primarily from the insights offered by Disability Justice activism and women-of-color feminist thought. Intervening into ethnic American scholarship that envisions liberation primarily in terms of self-ownership and bodily wholeness, a crip-of-color critique instead asks what liberation might look like when able-bodiedness is no longer centered.[13] Rather than reading for evidence of self-ownership or resistance, then, it reads for relations of social, material, and prosthetic support—that is, the various means through which lives are enriched, enabled, and made possible. In so doing, it honors vulnerability, disability, and inter/dependency, instead of viewing such conditions as evidence of political failure or weakness. A crip-of-color critique thus recognizes and centers the vast networks of support that enable contemporary life; as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson once observed, "Our bodies need care; we all need assistance to live."[14] It highlights modes of affirming, organizing, and supporting racialized life in which self-sufficiency no longer registers as an ideal.

Following Jasbir Puar, a crip-of-color critique thus asks us to conceptualize disability "in terms of precarious populations,"[15] which prompts disability scholars to engage more extensively with questions of state-sanctioned violence.[16] Such an engagement would, again, shift our understanding of disability from *noun*—a minority identity to be claimed—to *verb*: the state-sanctioned disablement of racialized and impoverished communities via resource deprivation.[17] Indeed, a crip-of-color critique urges us to consider the ways in which the state, rather than protecting disabled people, in fact operates as an apparatus of racialized disablement, whether through criminalization and police brutality, or compromised public educational systems and welfare reform. Further, as a critical methodology, it would ask us to consider the ableist reasoning and language underpinning the racialized distribution of violence. In other words, this mode of critique underscores the pathologizing language of the state itself, levied through accusations of insanity, criminality, stupidity, or dependency, which justify the expendability of racialized life. A crip-of-color critique thus aligns itself with the analysis of state violence central to the works of Cohen and other women-of-color / queer-of-color feminists, which—in distinction from nationalist, identitarian, or rights-based movements—refuse to frame the nation-state as a haven of protection. Such ideologies prompt us to move away from reform-oriented strategies that prioritize the attainment of legal rights, and toward more disruptive modes of organizing life altogether—radical imaginaries modeled, for instance, in the writings of disabled poet-activists Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa.[18] In this way, a crip-of-color critique continues the speculative project of world-making practiced by Anzaldúa, which yielded the imaginary—and pointedly *crip*—geography of *El Mundo*

Zurdo (the left-handed world): "the colored, the queer, the poor, the female, the physically challenged" were the primary inhabitants of this insurgent space.[19] Through the forging of *El Mundo Zurdo*, Anzaldúa enacts the poetics of survival I refer to above.[20] According to self-described black queer troublemaker Alexis Pauline Gumbs, such a poetics refers to the practice of using language and culture to intervene into narratives of expendability, and to instead inscribe an existence for racialized, impoverished, and disabled populations that refuses the violence of the present. Against the deadly imperatives of capitalism and the state, *El Mundo Zurdo* nourishes those people "on the bottom" who, "hand in hand, brew and forge a revolution."[21]

Of course, I could not complete this response without addressing Minich's call for disability as a *teaching*, as well as a research, methodology. What might it mean for universities to *meaningfully* incorporate disability into teaching and mentoring spaces, not just in terms of their content, but as fundamental to the ways in which they circulate, produce, and legitimate knowledge? Minich stresses the need for classroom accessibility beyond the constraints of diagnostic models, and I'll additionally note the intensified levels of scholarly productivity that mark us as fit or unfit for academic citizenship, as well as the systemic exhaustion of women of color (WoC) intellectuals, who typically assume greater service/mentoring duties while receiving less mentorship and support. In her essay "The Shape of My Impact," Alexis Pauline Gumbs describes how Audre Lorde and June Jordan were respectively denied a reduced teaching load and medical leave from their institutions (Hunter College and UC Berkeley, respectively), despite their documented battles with breast cancer.[22] This, too, is disability history: the overworked bodies of Lorde and Jordan in their institutional homes, subject to the twinned forces of cancer and institutional racism. And in the interest of our not repeating this history, I suggest that a critical disability methodology also necessitates a turn to what some have called "slow professoring": resistance to the relentless output and labor often held up as a measure of our professional value, and relatedly, resistance to the overworking of WoC intellectuals as a result.[23] This is, in a broader sense, a refusal to equate productivity and work with one's life worth.[24] Lorde and Jordan's stories also necessitate, as Gumbs suggests, a refusal to view the university as the only the legitimate site of knowledge production—WoC feminist and disabled intellectuals have long written and theorized outside the boundaries of institutional approval, and their words have survived nonetheless. Indeed, to take seriously disability as methodology is to take seriously this politics of refusal, to recognize disablement and racism as inextricably entangled, and to enact intellectual practices—like resistance to hyper-productivity—that honor disabled embodiment and history. It is to insist on survival in intellectual spaces for those, as Lorde famously put it, "were never meant to survive."[25]

Notes

1. Audre Lorde, "A Burst of Light," in *I Am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings of Audre Lorde*, ed. Rudolph P. Byrd, Johnetta Betsch Cole, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 132. ↩
2. See Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). ↩
3. Julie Minich, "Enabling Whom? Critical Disability Studies Now," *Lateral: Journal of The Cultural Studies Association* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2016), http://csalateral.org/wp/issue/5-1/forum-alt-humanities-critical-disability-studies-now-minich/. ↩
4. I use this term in my manuscript-in-progress, *Anatomy of the City: Race, Infrastructure, and U.S. Fictions of Dependency*. The term "dis/crip of color critique"

has also been used by Liat Ben-Moshe in the context of criminalization and incarceration, for instance, in her conference talk entitled "Racial-pathologization and the rise and potential fall of the carceral" and in her forthcoming manuscript.

5. Minich, "Enabling Whom?"
6. Ibid.
7. The performance and activist group Sins Invalid is a primary example of Disability Justice, as is the related movement-building work of Patty Berne, Mia Mingus, Stacy Milbern, Leroy Moore, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, and others. For crip theory, see Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), and Carrie Sandahl, "Queering the Crip or Cripping the Queer?: Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 9, nos. 1-2 (2003): 25–26.
8. See Grace Kyungwon Hong, *Ruptures of American Capital: Women of Color Feminism and the Culture of Immigrant Labor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xxvi. Many scholars of women of color and postcolonial feminism have also employed some version of this concept. Some notable examples include Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 4th ed., ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015); Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 1987); Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984); Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983) 356–368; Maria Cotera, *Native Speakers: Ella Deloria, Zora Neale Hurston, Jovita Gonzalez, and the Poetics of Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010); Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism," in *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003): 43–84.
9. Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 3, no. 4 (May 1997): 438.
10. Ibid., 453.
11. See also Sami Schalk, "Coming to Claim Crip: Disidentification With/in Disability Studies," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2013), http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/3705.
12. I should note that coalition building between critical ethnic / queer / disability studies is already taking place. In addition to crip theory and Disability Justice, see Julie Minich, *Accessible Citizenships: Disability, Nation, and the Cultural Politics of Greater Mexico* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014); Cynthia Wu, *Chang and Eng Reconnected: The Original Siamese Twins in American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 2012); Ellen Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender, Race* (New York: NYU Press, 2014); Mel Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Nirmala Erevelles, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011); the anthology *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions,* ed. Christopher M. Bell (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012), among others.

13. For scholarship that critiques the equation of self-ownership with political liberation, particularly in the context of ethnic studies and ethnic nationalism, see Minich, *Accessible Citizenships,* and Maria Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
14. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory," *NWSA Journal* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 2002): 21.
15. Jasbir Puar, "Coda: The Cost of Getting Better: Suicide, Sensation, Switchpoints," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 18, no. 1 (2012): 154.
16. I do not wish to posit myself as a pioneer of this approach to disability politics. For other disability and proto-disability scholarship that critiques state violence (particularly vis-à-vis institutionalization), see Irving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961); James W. Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Mental Retardation in the United States* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994); Steven Noll and James W. Trent, eds., *Mental Retardation in America: A Historical Reader* (New York: New York University Press 2004); Steven J. Taylor, *Acts of Conscience: World War II, Mental Institutions, and Religious Objectors* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009); Nirmala Erevelles, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Liat Ben-Moshe, Chris Chapman, and Allison C. Carey, eds., *Disability Incarcerated: Imprisonment and Disability in the United States and Canada* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).
17. My understanding of state-sanctioned violence vis-à-vis disablement is informed explicitly by Ruth Wilson Gilmore's definition of racism: "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death." See Gilmore, *The Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 27.
18. For examples of this kind of thinking in disability studies, see Margaret Price, "The Precarity of Disability/Studies in Academe," where she elucidates the concept of "crip spacetime"—forthcoming in the anthology *Precarious Rhetorics*, Wendy S. Hesford, Adela C. Licona, and Christa Teston, eds. (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press).
19. Gloria Anzaldúa, "El Mundo Zurdo," in *This Bridge Called My Back*, 218. See also Anzaldúa's conceptualization of the borderlands / la frontera: "*Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass, over, or go through the confines of the 'normal'" (3). In *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 1987).
20. I borrow my understanding of a poetics of survival from Alexis Pauline Gumbs's "'We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves': The Queer Survival of Black Feminism" (dissertation, Duke University, 2010). In this document, Gumbs draws upon Sylvia Wynter's definition of the poetic to explain the ways in which black feminist poets like Audre Lorde and June Jordan interrupted narratives of criminal black mothering to insist on new, affirmative meanings for black life.
21. Anzaldúa, "El Mundo Zurdo," 219.

22. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "The Shape of My Impact," *The Feminist Wire*, Oct 29, 2012, http://www.thefeministwire.com/2012/10/the-shape-of-my-impact/.
23. See Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).
24. For a fuller explanation of disability as it relates to productivity, work, and life worth, see Sunny Taylor, "The Right Not to Work: Power and Disability," *Monthly Review* 55, no. 10 (March 2004), http://monthlyreview.org/2004/03/01/the-right-not-to-work-power-and-disability/. For a thorough anti-work feminist critique, see Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
25. Lorde, "A Litany for Survival."

Bio

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Jina B. Kim is a Consortium for Faculty Diversity postdoctoral fellow at Mount Holyoke College in the program in Critical Social Thought. In August 2016, she received her PhD in the departments of English and Women's Studies from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Her research interests rest at the intersection of ethnic American literary, feminist-of-color, and disability studies, and she is currently at work on a manuscript on multi-ethnic U.S. literatures and cultures in the afterlife of 1996 welfare reform. In 2012, she received the Irving K. Zola Award for Emerging Scholars in Disability Studies. In Fall 2018, she will begin as Assistant Professor of English and SWG (Study of Women and Gender) at Smith College.

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