

Crip Times: Disability, Globalization, and Resistance

An interview with Robert McRuer (George Washington University)
by Giti Hatef-Rossa (IRTG Diversity, Universität Trier)

Hatef-Rossa: Welcome to the “International Research Training Group IRTG Diversity Podcast” on “Temporalities of Diversity.” My name is Giti Hatef-Rossa and I am a doctoral researcher within the IRTG. I’m in my forties; I’ve got salt and pepperish hair up to my chin; I’m wearing a black shirt and I’m sitting at my desk in my study. In the background, there’s a book shelf and a red cupboard and a guitar. Our guest is Professor Robert McRuer from the English department of the George Washington University. He is known as one of the founding scholars involved in forming the field of queer disabilities and particularly for the theoretical perspective on crip theory. Welcome Robert.

McRuer: Thank you. I’m happy to be here.

Hatef-Rossa: Would you briefly describe yourself and where you are?

McRuer: I am sitting at home as most people are around the world and I am in a medium lit room with books behind me on a white sofa. I’m a white man in my mid-fifties and have a green polo shirt on and a bit of a beard.

Hatef-Rossa: Thank you. The title of your recent book is “Crip Times: Disability, Globalization, and Resistance.” The times element in your title suggests that the construct of temporality is relevant to your research and in this podcast - as I said before - we decided to focus on temporalities of diversity. So I would like to ask you to reflect on the concepts of temporalities, diversity, and crip from the perspective of your research field.

McRuer: Sure, I’d be happy to. I tended to use the term crip times in a really multivalent way in the study. The book looks at a global austerity politics and puts forward the idea that disability is a sort of undertheorized but absolutely essential component of that global politics. The book is centered on the UK but spins out to Spain and Greece and the United States and Latin America, and the times of the title are at least doubled whereby, on the one hand, looking at the age of austerity, the age of neoliberalism in particular, crip times are virtually Victorian dark times. They are bad times for the vast majority of people who are suffering beneath them because of cuts to public services, because of all the other effects of austerity, raising the retirement age, privatizing more and more education, health care services and so forth. All of that ensures that crip times has that sort of negative valence but I

wanted it to also tap into a different sort of future-oriented temporality, whereby crip times represents the inventive engaging generative ways that disabled artists, activists and theorists around the globe have resisted austerity and resisted these bleak hard and challenging times. That said, I think we can add even more layers to what temporality means within crip times. I think neoliberalism in general is always forward-looking. My colleague Kateřina Kolářová in the Czech Republic writes about how the post-socialist period was explicitly characterized by a capitalist temporality that put the past behind us and saw the future as the cure after a century of socialism and her argument is that capitalist temporality means that various crip experiences and crip lives are invisibilized and so she looks in her work to the ways in which crip bodies and lives and experiences in the socialist period actually generated various kinds of knowledges that are endangered being forgotten - if we're on that straight line forward-looking temporality. So, I think my work is part of larger work in both queer temporalities and crip temporalities. We often talk about crip time in disability communities and that is meant as a kind of endearing ingroup reference to slowness. So if something is happening on crip time, it means like okay don't count on it, starting at exactly the top of the hour, don't count on it finishing, make sure there is plenty of time for mobility issues or for translation issues; if we're talking about sign language or other modalities for interruptions that might come from health-related issues and so forth. So crip time is generally this kind of endearing ingroup phrase that talks about slowness, but it's also been theorized in really stretchy ways by others in both positive and negative ways. So for Ellen Samuels in her widely circulated essay "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time" she talks about how crip time is often painful time and [sick] time and isolated time even if it also might be... she ends with a notion that it also might be writing time and there are a range of theories who are thinking about, well you know, I'm sick but I'm writing a lot. Lots of people are thinking that I'm not writing a lot but I'm thinking particularly of Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's book "Carework" where she talks about how being sick often does generate a time for writing and so crip time sometimes is writing time as well. But all of these temporalities are very uneven. You'll note in contrast to that straight line of productive capitalist movements towards the future.

Hatef-Rossa: You visualized on your book cover an artist's work of art in the background: 'Figures. You show something [a performance] that took a lot of time. Can you describe why you decided for this background and a little bit about the artist who is involved in this work?

McRuer: The artist's name is Liz Crow. She is a disability artist based in Bristol in the UK. She's done a number of amazing installations, including one called "Bedding out" that's very much about temporality where she performed in a public space in her bed and invited people to tweet and engage as a way of kind of making visible what is often not so visible when disability is in the house

or what have you and so she's done a range of other things including stuff connected to the T4 program in Germany. There is this place in London in Trafalgar square where there are four plinths but the fourth plinth is reserved for artists. And there was one period where in a 24-hour period I think twenty-four different artists were there and she performed in her wheel chair in a Nazi uniform to draw attention to the dangers of the forgotten history of those who were killed during that period. The piece in question was called "Figures" and was an idea that she had to draw attention to lives impacted by austerity in the UK, particularly though the project ultimately became more global.

Initially she was thinking "oh I want to do something that represents all the lives lost to austerity," but for many reasons that became challenging. How does one quantify that? You know lives lost to suicide, infant mortality, someone dying early for not having adequate care. There's many things that could be but it's hard to tell and also, ultimately, Liz wanted to put together an installation that looked at the suffering that resulted in death and the suffering that is ongoing for those who are alive. So what she did was a performance piece and she excavated raw river mud from the banks of the river Avon near Bristol and she transported that mud to the banks of the Themse in London for I think a twelve day period in April 2015 - if I have the date right March and April, I think - and at low tide, so roughly an hour at sunrise and sunset, she would sit on the banks of the Themse and sculpt figures. Sort of abstract figures but figures that suggest humans but not necessarily particularize humans. You could see eyes and a nose and a sort of neck but they were still rather abstract. She's a wheel chair user and would be carried to the side on the Themes because it's not accessible. Each time that she would sculpt and as she sculpted, her artistic team was up on the walk talking to people and I was sometimes part of that artistic team for a few days talking about what austerity was doing to people in the UK and elsewhere and those conversations were very varied. Some people said "oh she is wasting her time," others would be involved in politics of a particular location in the UK, others were making connections to Spain and often various people would descend the ladder to go talk to her directly. As she sculpted, there was an installation where each figure represented someone's story. So someone who ended his life because he felt that there was no more resources to care for him in the family, someone who ended up living out of a food bank because of missing an appointment. There is very punitive requirements in the UK. If you miss a benefits appointment you're sanctioned and you can't come back for another month and so people ended up living from food banks. The stories involved transportation, education, and so forth. So eventually she had one sculpture for every constituency in the UK. It was a beautiful, a massive performance piece that they then traveled around the UK with, southern part of the UK. Eventually these were all carried back to Bristol and in a final performance, almost final performance, she had the pieces ground into dust in a bonfire while all of the stories were read aloud. And then the absolutely final piece was the ashes of the sculptures were scattered into the sea to represent solidarity with people fighting austerity in Chile and in Spain and in Greece and

the US and other locations. So it's a piece that captured again that alternative temporality. How are people actually getting by under very dire circumstances and what kinds of solidarity are forged in and through those challenging circumstances?

Hatef-Rossa: So in the snapshot of this performance you show the outcome of this performance in the background of your book cover - that's looking great.

McRuer: Yeah the cover of the book shows the place where, as the pieces are accumulated, they were increasingly displayed.

Hatef-Rossa: In what ways is diversity a temporal construct?

McRuer: That's a very abstract question but I certainly can talk to it. I think in a really basic way we might say that what the philosopher Michel Foucault called subjugated knowledges interrupted what we might think of as canonical knowledges - History with a capital H as it may be - and so movements connected to diversity for the past fifty years have insisted "wait a second, your history with a capital H is writing us out" and so those were temporal interruptions and interruptions that also drew attention to sort of whole alternative temporal universes inhabited by subjugated people, subjugated knowledges. So I think diversity is a temporal concept through that notion of interruption. I'd also say diversity is a temporal construct through its opening up of alternative futurities. So, many many people now cite the late queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz who wrote a book called "Cruising Utopia" where he looked at basically how queer time is always not quite here. To be queer is to be not yet here, not yet not now, and many thinkers in disability studies and crip culture have found that really useful for thinking about disability in particular, because disability is often understood in the dominant ableist imagination as that which is without a future, has no future or what we want to avoid in the future. So an ableist imagination would kind of genocidally imagine a world without disability in it and so that notion of cruising utopia and alternative futures is the other thing that I think sort of diversity as a temporal construct bequeaths us.

Hatef-Rossa: How is crip related to the concept of diversity? For example, do you think that the media have responded to the UN convention on rights for persons with disability - which went in

force more than a decade ago - by new forms of representation and more participation?

McRuer: Crip is related to diversity in a kind of contestatory ways. I mean I think a certain notion of diversity can be easily commodified and capitalized upon and we've seen that perhaps most pronouncedly in the queer movement, where queer remains, I think, an often resistant defiant concept but it, also over the past thirty years, has become a market and you get queer pride brought to you by "Absolut Vodka" and things like that. So I think diversity as it is contained or domesticated by neoliberal capitalism puts things into neat categories that it can then market to or use as kind of a representative of how benevolent it is. The UK is a great example of that: the London 2012 Paralympic Games were offered up the most watched Paralympic Games in history, they were offered up as a kind of celebration of diversity and even by the very conservative government that was implementing austerity at the time. At the exact moment that Paralympians were being broadcasted to the world, disabled activists were outside the stadium protesting the government's policy and how it was devastating the lives of disabled people. So the point in that example is that diversity was being weaponized to serve as, to mix metaphors, to serve as a kind of smoke screen to obscure what was actually happening on the ground for disabled lives. So in that sense diversity can be quite problematic but I think we're constantly reinventing it as well and I think that's what crip and queer at its best also do. So crip is definitely an I-statement, people do insist "I am crip, I am part of crip culture, I live a crip live, I live in crip time," all of these things. It's a substantive, defiant, excessive, flamboyant identity. It's also a nice term for talking about what doesn't fit neatly into categories. So crip is about that which gets left out, which gets invisibilized, which doesn't get to qualify for a placement at the diversity ball. So it's a nice stretchy generatively paradoxical concept in relation to diversity.

Hatef-Rossa: And jumping into the present. The pandemic: Do you think that the Black Lives Matter movement is also some kind of creating a smokescreen for crip and disability movements? Is this stronger and now covering up the other movements or is it something where everything comes together and one movement supports the other?

McRuer: I hope the latter and I can absolutely affirm that disability artists and activists and theorists stand with BLM. In fact Leroy Moore and others have shown that a high number of people who are victims of anti-black police violence are actually also disabled. You hear it in the very words from George Floyd: I can't breathe. It's certainly true that he couldn't breathe because he had a knee upon his neck but he also had various pre-existing conditions that would mark him as disabled or crip and that's not the only high-profile case where that is true.

Hatef-Rossa: So that's intersectionality also?

McRuer: Right and I think it's really vital to say their names and to stress that we are in an incredibly dangerous moment where black lives need to be absolutely centered and the centrality of anti-blackness to this violence needs to be constantly spoken. That said, often again the victims of that violence are disabled as well and it seems that that violence sometimes is invisibilized and it only serves all movements better to stress "look this is anti-disabled as well as anti-black" and also, as Anna Marlowe has written, it's also often anti-fat. So the fat rights movement has talked about fatnesses and identity and it's interesting to look at certain instances of police violence in the way in which body size is mobilized as an excuse: oh Eric Garner was 300 pounds and so of course he couldn't breathe. As though that somehow justified the violence that was meted out upon him. So I actually think that disability and crip activists are really tied into the BLM movement and fully behind it in ways that are quite exciting and hopefully that intersectionality as you say will only grow especially if we can end the current global nightmare that we are in, especially in the United States.

Hatef-Rossa: Yes... a couple of days to go.

McRuer: A couple of days to go...

Hatef-Rossa: Coming to the end of our interview I would like to invite you to meditate - or to speculate - on the future of criping. Crip as a verb: in your opinion what are the most prominent potentials and issues in this context?

McRuer: What I love about criping as a verb, which is important to stress that behind crip as a verb is already its functions as a noun, it functions as an adjective to modify culture or humor or film. But as a verb I love the fact that it is still being invented by disability communities like what do we mean when we are talking about 'to crip?' Carrie Sandahl [Associate Professor, Culture and Humanities, Disability and Human Development at the University of Illinois Chicago] was the one to first theorize what criping might be and she's noted in the past how people forget, how much she tied it to humor. So criping for her was often about the ways disabled performers in particular undo ableism through biting sarcasm and wit and satire. So 'to crip' for her was to expose sort of the arbitrariness of what's normal and what's abnormal but to often do it with this kind of flair, this comedic flair. I think 'to crip' also often gets at what is made invisible in relation to a topic where disability should be absolutely central. So, you know, in the world that I moved in it's like we talk about disability and neoliberalism all the time and it's like of course we would. It seems so natural. I think this is true for queer theorists

of neoliberalism as well. But you know the big boys of neoliberal theory are not talking about disability. They are not actually talking about queerness either. That's a sort of side issue and neoliberalism is the sort of big economic issue that is problematic and needs to be critiqued but disability is not part of their agenda. So to counter that in Prague in 2010 in 2013 there was a conference first one called "Crippling Neoliberalism" then a couple of years later "Crippling Development." So putting these concepts - neoliberalism, development - on the table concepts that aren't marked as disabled on the surface but 'to cripp' them means to say well actually disability is totally essential to our conversations and needs to be brought to the position from which it was kind of banished. So 'to cripp' in that sense is to make visible what was actively invisibilized. I think 'to cripp' also often relies on just this sort of basic pointing the finger at an access gap. So like someone saying I wanna cripp this is like saying look my body doesn't fit in the space, look I can't understand what's happening here because it's not captioned, look I need this to be repeated because my mind functions in a particular way. So 'to cripp' can also be about just pointing out where access needs to be made more visible. I love the ways in which Aimi Hamraie who is a theorist of build culture, the build environment... She talks about sort of cripp technoscience along with her colleague or I should say they - Hamraie uses the they/them pronouns. They talk about cripp technoscience along with their colleague Kelly Fritsch and they have written the "Crip Technoscience Manifesto" but Hamraie's contribution that I find so wonderful is a distinction between neoliberal curb cuts and cripp curb cuts. So neoliberal curb cuts are curb cuts that make everything function so smoothly that disability disappears. If there is a curb cut okay [we can show you how] to use that so we don't have to think about disability anymore, but for Hamraie a cripp curb cut messes things up and makes it impossible to... and it's kind of an abstract concept but they mean it to talk about how curb cuts are constantly needed to interrupt a conversation, talk about what's lacking, and so forth.

Hatef-Rossa: So everybody can cripp?

McRuer: I think so. I mean I think just as we know that feminism is an analytic, they can be carried to any situation even if it doesn't appear to be about gender on the surface. So it's very possible to talk about a feminist reading of anything in that sense it's possible to talk about a queer reading a cripp reading about anything. I do think it's important for able-bodied people in particular to be aware of when and where to use crippling in a non-appropriative way. If someone is using 'to cripp' in that verb sense that was the second last one that I gave you pointing on access. You know that does seem to be a more sort of disability specific use of 'to cripp.' Like I need access to this room I'm gonna cripp this situation, but I think many critical thinkers and activists and artists can cripp whether they are able-bodied or not if in fact we would turn to that notion of making visible the invisible lies centrality of

disability to a given issue or location.

Hatef-Rossa: So to more crippling.

McRuer: Yes more crippling. I like that because it sort of echoes the famous Jewish sense of more life and more life, more crippling, l'chaim is what we might say.

Hatef-Rossa: That's a perfect ending and last sentence for our podcast. I thank you very much on behalf of the IRTG and I'm looking forward to your next work. What are you working on at the moment?

McRuer: A bibliography on crip theory that will be a research bibliography but beyond that germinating slowly a project on disability justice in Latin America. I spent most of the lockdown in Columbia. I'm back in the US now but I'm thinking about disability justice crossing borders in Latin America specifically.

Hatef-Rossa: So it's a project for 2021, for next year?

McRuer: And beyond.

Hatef-Rossa: And beyond, okay. So thank you very much.

McRuer: All right thank you. It's been a pleasure.

Hatef-Rossa: For me too.

(Transcript: Isabelle Morais, Universität Trier)