

Feminist, Queer, Crip

Alison Kafer. Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2013.

Reviewed by Emma Sheppard

When opening *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, it is immediately apparent that, as for so many disability researchers writing on the subject, this book is intensely personal for Kafer. She begins with recounting her own disability, and other's perception that, in becoming disabled, she has lost not just a normal body, but a future. It is this future – this perceived lack of future – that concerns Kafer.

Kafer's positioning is influenced by more than disability; it is as the title suggests, feminist, and queer. Kafer rejects the fixed identities and delineations of disabled/non-disabled and impairment/disability that restrict the social model, while also arguing for a political awareness of disability, of medical and social cares, bringing disability activism and a challenge to the depoliticisation of disability to the foreground. This approach, which she calls a "political/relation model" (Kafer 2013: 4) is not unique, but Kafer's articulation of the need for such an approach is succinct and immediately persuasive – it makes *sense*, it is broad without ignoring nuance, flexible without being vague, and (speaking personally, here) it fits the lives of disabled people, with room to look critically at medicine without refusing medical care, to call for independent living without denying those who need assistance a voice.

Kafer's concern for future is a crip concern; she is heavily influenced here by McRuer's *Crip Theory* (McRuer 2006), but also by the concept of *crip time*, "flex time not just expanded but exploded; ... [the] reimagining [of] our notions of what can and should happen in time ... [the recognition of] how expectations of 'how long things take' are based on very particular minds and bodies ... a challenge to normative and normalizing expectations of pace and scheduling. Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds" (Kafer 2013, p. 27). This reading of time extends to notions of futurity, examining queer time through a crip lens to expose how disability and illness are central to notions of the future, exposing how a reimagining of futures could help the current – and future – lives of disabled people.

Kafer does this through exploring several different situations and aspects that include disability, from reproduction to the environment to advertising; each approach is treated separately, building a clear picture of an interdisciplinary critical approach that is thoughtful as well as thought-provoking; even as I disagreed with Kafer at points, I understood her position clearly, and was challenged to rethink my own.

The first of these situations concerns Ashley X, who underwent what is variously called “the Ashley Treatment”, or a combined hysterectomy, bilateral breast bud removal (a double mastectomy for pre-pubescent bodies) and growth attenuation through hormone treatment, which resulted in Ashley remaining physically small, as well as rendering her infertile. Ashley’s thoughts on her surgeries and treatments cannot be communicated, as Ashley was born with a severe neurological defect that leaves her unable to raise her head, communicate, or feed herself. Kafer takes the time to identify several themes in both arguments for and against Ashley’s treatment, writing a powerful critique through a crip and feminist lens that acknowledges the complexity of the interacting issues of care provision – both paid and by family – and the value of that care, of sexuality, of adulthood, and of quality of life. In *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Ashley X and her case are read as an issue of asynchronicity, her body growing beyond her mind, in a way that discomforts her (adult) caregivers and medical professionals; Kafer’s point here is needle-sharp, exposing the core issue, around which sexuality, fertility, care, and quality of life are all positioned.

For Ashley, disability is framed in terms of economic productivity – an unreachable state for her – but it is worth noting that Kafer’s reading equates personhood with *adulthood*; in remaining a child in size and fertility, Kafer positions Ashley as never reaching full personhood. While her disability creates the possibility of Ashley being fertile and sexual as a monstrous one, a spectre of a disabled future, Kafer reads sexuality, and bodily pleasure as a solely adult experience, denying that the pleasure-feeling body does not have to go through puberty to enjoy sensation. This is not to say that Kafer’s reading of Ashley and the Ashley Treatment should be ignored; it is nuanced and careful, but incomplete.

This incompleteness is my biggest issue with *Feminist, Queer, Crip*; while the book is readable, the analysis nuanced and detailed, it lacks a global approach – it is very focused on disability in the United States, with very little in the way of acknowledgement of how disability is globally located as well as situated differently in particular places and spaces (Wendell 1996; Grech 2012). Kafer does integrate issues of intersectional identities, including analysis that account for gender and sexuality, while race and class are included less frequently; this is particularly notable in her discussion of reproductive technologies used to select for (rather than against) a particular disability. In the case she discusses, the interaction of sexuality and Deafness is important – for a Deaf, lesbian couple, heterosexual reproduction (framed as “natural”) is impossible, while choosing donor sperm to favour the chances of conceiving a deaf child is considered terrible, because, as Kafer reads, they are choosing a disabled future. It is a pity, however, that in mentioning the case of Kijuana Chamber’s case as an addendum to the case of Sharon Duchesneau and Colleen McCullough, Kafer does not dig deeper into the intersection of race and disability when it comes to reproductive technology – particularly considering the history of eugenic forced sterilization that has been tied to the lives of women of colour and disabled women (Kerr & Shakespeare 2002; Gillespie-Sells et al. 1998; Davies 2006; Carlson 2005; Hughes 2005).

Kafer is not trying, however, to write a globally-relevant text (an arguably impossible task), but by ignoring global issues, and minimising the problems of race and class, her analysis can seem lacking – particularly when it comes to her chapters

on the use of disability in advertising and the interaction of disability and constructions of the natural environment. In the first case, Kafer is considering cultural understandings of disability, particularly the construction of disability which can be understood as a part of the tragedy model of disability (Crow 1996; Swain & French 2000); there is an underlying assumption of universal cultural understandings of disability in Kafer's reading, which may not hold up to a reading of similar adverts in a different location.

At the same time, the chapter on disability in advertising is an interesting one, not as immediately linked to concepts of futurity as reproduction and sexuality, but developing the theme of disability as a moral issue, where disability is an apolitical character failing, and overcoming disability is the role of the inspirational supercrip (Kafer 2013; Ham 2009; Smith 2011; Milam 1993). This reading of disability, particularly the role of disability in popular culture, is not a new one, but Kafer combines these with a queer understanding, which moves the analysis on further, noting that this discourse marginalizes those who have failed to live up to supercrip standards; the adverts she critiques call for a better future based on shared values, but this better future is heteronormative, with disabled people "relegated to the margins ... we're admitted only insofar as we promise not to complain but to inspire" (Kafer 2013: 93). This chapter also continues the theme of the depoliticization of disability, noting that these adverts use disability as a way of countering accusations of having a political aim – despite calling for a particular set of societal values that are undoubtedly political.

This depoliticization – and Kafer's call for a repoliticization of disability – is key to her analysis of how disability interacts with constructions of environmental politics and the natural world. In crippling discourses of nature, Kafer engages with how what "constitutes 'nature' or the 'natural' and 'unnatural' are completely bound up in our own specific histories and cultural assumptions" (Kafer 2013: 131); we create nature to fit a specific ideal of what is natural, and who – and how they – should interact with it. However, again, it is worth noting that while Kafer's engagement is interesting and effectively demonstrates the cross-disciplinary application of her approach, Kafer's analysis again lacks an engagement with how race and class interact with constructions of nature and how nature should be interacted with.

At the same time, Kafer's acknowledgement that loss and ambivalence can also be involved in crip understandings of nature raises an interesting point; studies of disability frequently tone down the individual difficulties of disability, while addressing the very important large-scale issues, such as structural disableism and the built environment; this can mean that pain, loss, and internalised disableism are more often swept under the carpet (Wendell 1996; Hughes & Paterson 1997; Shakespeare 1998). A crip approach such as Kafer advocates, however, may provide an approach which includes individual issues and bodily problems in a context that addresses both social and personal structures affecting the lives of disabled people, as well as acknowledging that disability and/or impairment are not fixed categories, and unpacking the structures of normal/disabled/impaired within specific contexts can continue to open up other avenues of investigation in other disciplines and parallel arenas although perhaps it needs to be noted that, out of necessity, disability studies has always been at least partially interdisciplinary.

Kafer's political/relational model, and her crip approach, is considered in terms of both academic and activist work in the final chapter; this is in many ways the most polemical, and radical, chapter, reading more like a call for activism than a critique of disableist discourses. Kafer demonstrates the coalitions between disabled and other groups, with space for dissent and contestation, which she identifies as key to developing ideas. She states that "thinking through accessible space and accessible futures means addressing the exclusions of feminist and queer political visions of the future, highlighting these theories' reliance on ideologies of wholeness, complicity in compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness, and marginalisation of disabled people. What is needed, then, is not only a trenchant critique of ableism but also a desire to think disability otherwise" (Kafer 2013: 153); her bridge-building vision holds potential for academics and activists alike, but particularly for queer activists.

Overall, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* is an important work, developing ideas that have been floating on the margins of disability studies for some time, in an articulate, thought-provoking package. While Kafer's lack of global vision is an issue running throughout the book, she nonetheless demonstrates a depth of analysis and a critically crip approach that would complement and expand existing thought in disability studies, as well as any work that draws on feminist and queer theory.

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