

**The Crip, The Fat and The Ugly in an Age of Austerity:  
Resistance, Reclamation and Affirmation**

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## Forum Introduction

### The Crip, The Fat and The Ugly in an Age of Austerity: Resistance, Reclamation and Affirmation

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Welcome to this special forum, *The Crip, The Fat and The Ugly in an Age of Austerity: Resistance, Reclamation and Affirmation*. Our original desire in putting out this call was to critically explore the processes and politics of austerity upon diverse and marginalized embodiments in neoliberal and advanced capitalist times. Global austerity has a far reach, often into, around, behind, beyond and alongside the body. Global austerity routinely categorizes body-minds[i] in terms of productivity, value, cost, ability and aesthetics. Body-minds are positioned vis-a-vis global austerity as a site for social order, economic possibility, progression, and big business. Whereas “[a]n able body is the body of a citizen; deformed deafened, amputated, obese, female, perverse, crippled, maimed and blinded bodies do not make up the body politic” (Davis, 1995, pp. 71–72). In devising this forum, we yearned for space to contemplate the aesthetics, experiences and the reification of body-minds - how capitalism makes sense of and shapes body-minds; the ways in which austerity both marks and produces bodies and selves, and the means through which these are further shaped by disability, race, class, gender, age, size, sexuality, and nation. Although we explore aspects of these in our own work (Liddiard, 2018; Slater, 2015), we wanted to create a space to connect with others and think about diverse and marginalized embodiments in austere times. In this introduction, we story the process through which we put the issue together, from our original decision making and putting out the call, to supporting authors to revise their contributions. We do so because we feel it’s a fitting way to speak to the inclusions and exclusions made in this forum. At the same time, we feel it offers a broader commentary as to the “state” of global disability studies today.

#### Why the Crip, the Fat and the Ugly?

We could have chosen to title this forum differently. From our interest in bodies and embodiment, ‘the politics of embodiment in austere times’ or ‘diverse embodiment in austere times’ would have perhaps sufficed. Yet, whereas with ‘diversity’ comes liberal connotations of tolerance and ‘progression’ (Conrad, 2014), crip, fat and ugly are provocative, jarring terms which unsettle dominant cultures. As Nancy Mair writes in relation to naming herself a cripple: ‘perhaps I want them to wince’ (as cited in Clare, 1999, p. 82). Furthermore, crip and fat in particular come with certain histories and relationships; not just to academia, but also to arts and activism. Sandahl (2003) highlights that crip was being used in disability arts and activism prior to being taken seriously within academia. Indeed, crip is as much about “self-identified crips in the street - taking sledgehammers to inaccessible curbs, chaining

wheelchairs together in circles around buses or subway stations, demanding community-based services and facilities for independent or interdependent living” as it is about theorising the disabled body within culture (McRuer, 2006, pp. 33–34). We also chose *crip* for its relationship to *queer*, as Clare (1999) puts it, “[Q]ueer and cripple are cousins: words to shock, words to infuse with pride and self-love, words to resist internalized hatred, words to help forge a politics” (p. 84).

Similarly to *crip*, to claim *fat* is to reject its more liberally accepted euphemisms (‘plus-sized’, ‘big boned’, ‘curvy’) and pathologizing medical definitions (‘obese’, ‘morbidly obese’, ‘overweight’). *Fat studies* shares some ontological ground with *crip theory* (and indeed *disability studies* more broadly): both are skeptical of dominant social, cultural and political, largely medicalized beliefs about what bodies should do and be (Brandon & Pritchard, 2011; Cooper, 1997; Rothblum & Soloway, 2009). Furthermore, the growing discipline of *fat studies* is entangled with diverse *fat arts* and activist endeavors (Cooper, 2016). In her monograph, *Fat Activism*, one of Cooper’s (2016) participants describes *fat activism* as “being a response to the negative shit about fat. Challenging discourse, protesting stereotypes, countering fat hate, refusing to accept things, speaking truth to power, rejecting moral discourse concerning fatness, repudiating injustice” (p. 52).

In this forum we wanted to bring together the academic, the activist, the artistic and the lived to consider, critique and challenge ‘negative shit’ about what body-minds should do and be within contexts of austerity. *Crip* and *fat* allowed us to do this. We were also interested in centering the forum around a third term, ‘ugly’. Whereas *crip* and *fat* are increasingly theorized within academia and used for activist purposes, *ugly* appears relatively under-discussed in academia and/or activism, and much less identified with than *crip*, *fat* (or *queer*). Within *disability studies*, discussion of *ugly* appears mainly in the context of the American Ugly Laws which, in the late 19th and early 20th century, stated that “any person who is diseased, maimed, mutilated or in any way deformed so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object, or an improper person to be allowed in or on the streets, highways, thoroughfares, or public places in this city shall not therein or thereon expose himself to public view, under the penalty of a fine of \$1 for each offense” (Chicago City Code, 1881, as cited in Schweik, 2009, pp. 1–2). In her book, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public*, Schweik (2009) highlights that the ugly laws were not solely about disability, but reinforced gendered, classed and racialized understandings of bodies in public space. In a rare example calling for a reclamation of the ugly, Mingus (2011) understands *ugly* as a way to find coalition between social movements when she writes that moving towards the ugly “moves us closer to bodies and movements that disrupt, dismantle, disturb. Bodies and movements ready to throw down and create a different way for all of us, not just some of us.” She goes on to theorize the ugly as such:

“The magnificence of a body that shakes, spills out, takes up space, needs help, moseys, slinks, limps, drools, rocks, curls over on itself. The magnificence of a body that doesn’t get to choose when to go to the bathroom, let alone which bathroom to use. A body that doesn’t get to choose what to wear in the morning, what hairstyle to

sport, how they're going to move or stand, or what time they're going to bed. The magnificence of bodies that have been coded, not just undesirable and ugly, but un-human. The magnificence of bodies that are understanding gender in far more complex ways than I could explain in an hour. Moving beyond a politic of desirability to loving the ugly. Respecting Ugly for how it has shaped us and been exiled. Seeing its power and magic, seeing the reasons it has been feared. Seeing it for what it is: some of our greatest strength" (Mingus, 2011).

Mingus' (2011) essay is in part a call to celebrate those that have been told they don't fit, are wrong and are not good enough. Yet, she also asks us to nurture, rather than to reject, the ugly in ourselves in order to ally with other social movements. In her piece, *NoBody's Perfect: Charm, Willfulness and Resistance* (in this forum), Maria Tsakiri draws on Tobin Siebers' term, disability disqualifier, describing how disability as deficiency is subsequently used to disqualify (or subordinate) other social groups. Siebers (2010) uses the devaluing of femininity to explain: "[b]eneath the troping of femininity as biological deficiency lies the troping of disability as deficiency" (p. 24). Moving towards the ugly is arguably a way to resist the disqualifying of disability, and through such resistance, refuse to disqualify other forms of marginalization.

Perhaps moving towards the ugly is what Cooper (1997) was doing in her article, *Can a Fat Woman Call Herself Disabled?* Here she explores similarities and differences between fat and disabled lives. In doing this, she questions the ableism, and therefore distancing from disability, within 'size acceptance' communities. How many fat people would want to claim disability? Similarly, she wonders about the fatphobia within disability movements. Will disabled people reject fat people through buying into the discourse that fatness is self-inflicted? Perhaps too the queer crip artists in Sandahl (2003) are moving towards the ugly as they queer the crip and crip the queer: "queering critiques and expands notions of what it means to be crippled, and crippling critiques and expands notions of what it means to be queer" (Sandahl, 2003, p.37). And maybe moving towards the ugly is what disabled woman of colour and activist, Vilissa Thompson, was doing when she created #disabilitytoowhite to de-centre and call out the whiteness of disability activism and studies? Or what Clare (1999) is doing when he considers the entwined racism and ableism of the freak show and eugenics movements? Like these authors, and following Mingus, we wanted to use this forum as a space to think about overlapping oppressions and coalition, whilst continuing to explore Mingus' take on 'the ugly,'

### What Was Left Out

From our call, we received a series of insightful papers. However, despite the fascinating analyses offered by potential authors, we were also captured by what was left out of these contributions. To clarify: how had authors engaged with our call for papers? Why were some themes markedly more popular than others? What had been omitted and why? What were our original expectations?

Initially, we very were surprised that although authors engaged in exciting ways with issues of bodies and embodiment, austerity as a focus fell away and was paid far less attention. As editors, we (Kirsty and Jen) are both situated within England, and British Disability Studies. Our own experiences of austerity are very much rooted in overt and harmful discourses of scroungers, spongers and skivers and a drain on the welfare state which infiltrate everyday life (as discussed by Sandle, Day and Muskett, this forum). Furthermore, Disability Studies in the UK has its roots in a Marxist materialist approach to understanding disabled people's oppression, meaning that the academic home of UK Disability Studies is social policy and sociology departments - an apt place, perhaps, from which to explore austerity. On the other hand (and maybe for similar reasons), when wanting to explore how disability intersects with other forms of oppression - race, gender, sexuality and so on - we often find ourselves looking to colleagues in North America (e.g. Brown, Ashkenazy, & Onaiwu, 2017; Clare, 1999, 2017; Erevelles, 2011; Kafer, 2013; Mingus, 2011), Australia (Soldatic & Meekosha, 2014; Dowse, 2009) and the Global South (Chataika, 2018; Ghai, 2014; Grech, 2015). Indeed, our original call didn't cite any UK Disability Studies academics, but was rooted in the kinds of cultural studies approaches more akin to North American Disability Studies. We were therefore left wondering: was the overlooking of austerity a result of disciplinary difference? Or does a preoccupation with austerity lie with our geographical location as scholars emerging from Britain and, in particular, British Disability Studies? Is terminology an issue? Are we more aware of austerity politics and lexicon because of our own context?

Moving forward, although potential contributions discussed both fat and crip lives, we also noticed quickly that there was little explicit focus on theorizing the ugly. We wondered why this was: in an age of body modification and global normative aesthetics, perhaps there is not yet space to reclaim/discuss ugly? Exploring his own ease with crip, queer and gimp, but unease with freak, Clare (1999) reminds us that reclaiming words is complicated. Clare's discomfort with freak lies in the continued presence of the freak show. Although freak shows may not exist in their most commonly imagined form, he argues that they still exist within all places that disabled people are stared at: medical institutions, bus stops, welfare assessments. Indeed, two authors in this forum discuss the surveillance of disabled people's lives through classrooms, psychiatric institutions (Benham) and technologies of the quantified self (Schaffzin). For Garland-Thomson (2002), staring at disabled people emerges from "a culture [where] we are at once obsessed with and intensely conflicted about the disabled body. We fear, deify, disavow, avoid, abstract, revere, conceal, and reconstruct disability – perhaps because it is one of the most universal, fundamental of human experiences" (p. 57). The difference between modern day and traditional freak shows, Clare poses, is that disabled people being stared at today have less control today than some disabled people may have had in (historical) freak shows. Perhaps ugly is as, if not more, uncomfortable than freak: only denoting responses of shame, disgust, and an affective reading of the body. Through global austerity the crip, the fat *and* the ugly are typically Othered and denigrated bodies, identities, minds and selves, implicated and co-constituted by one another (Bergman, 2009; Kafer, 2013). Within a context of coloniality, transnational capitalism, patriarchy, cissexism and

white supremacy, the Crip, the fat and the ugly are rendered unintelligible (Butler, 1999), made in/visible (Sandahl, 2003) and vilified locally, nationally, and globally. Does global austerity, with all the precarity and violence it brings, make reclamation of largely unclaimed words too risky?

### Inclusions and Absences

Rather than try to answer the questions that we pose above, we leave them there to ponder, in relation to international and cross-cultural connections in global disability studies. Perhaps, one day, they themselves can frame another special issue or forum. Furthermore, it is important to highlight that our musings are in no way a criticism of the wonderfully eclectic range of submissions that we received, and which we proudly publish in this forum. That said, there are marked absences within the forum that need to be acknowledged. The contributions selected offer limited engagement with issues of race, queerness and fatness. Our calling for and curation of contributions has produced these omissions, and for that it is important we acknowledge their absence by calling this out, here and now, while also staying mindful that these absences *contain* the theoretical possibilities of this Forum. Let's take a moment now to consider the key contributions that embody this forum.

In *Working to Feel Better or Feeling Better to Work?: Discourse of Wellbeing in Austerity Reality TV*, Rowan Sandle, Katy Day and Tom Muskett interrogate the entangled representations of wellbeing, work and welfare under UK neoliberal austerity. Their arguments take place through an analysis of what has come to be known colloquially as 'austerity porn' or 'austerity reality television'. The authors argue that the cultural economies of austerity construct a 'good' welfare recipient as self-reliant, independent and working towards waged-work. In contrast, those particular bodies, minds and selves unwilling or able to benefit through waged-work are positioned as lazy and unnecessarily dependent on the welfare state. Individuals are therefore held accountable for any suffering, rather than the life-threatening context of austerity. Offering the deepest and most focused analysis of austerity within this forum, Sandle, Day and Muskett's paper leads us to ask, how does one reclaim, resist and celebrate diverse embodiments with the backdrop of these harsh realities because, as Clare (1999) reminds us, "[W]ithout pride, individual and collective resistance to oppression becomes nearly impossible?" (p. 107).

In *NoBody's Perfect: Charm, Willfulness and Resistance*, Maria Tsakiri begins to answer our call for resistance, as she examines representations of the disabled body in documentary film-maker Niko Von Glasow's *NoBody's Perfect* (2008). Using Glasow's film as illustrative, Tsakiri contrasts disability arts, culture and aesthetics with mainstream depictions of disabled people as strange curiosities, scroungers and work-shy. Importantly she notes that in such representations, disabled people are often drawn together with working class people, homeless people, immigrants, people of color and other marginalized groups. Tsakiri also furthers our introduction as she discusses the complexities of the gaze and the stare, arguing that documentary films can potentially offer staring encounters guided by disabled people. Drawing on crip killjoys and crip willfulness (Johnson & McRuer, 2014),

Tsakiri argues that *NoBody's Perfect* offers the opportunity to re-examine established canons of aesthetics and negotiate representations of the disabled body.

In *My Infectious Encounters as an Autistic Epidemic*, Jessica Benham also challenges mainstream representation. Here she particularly resists understandings of autism as deficit or separate to personhood, or that disabled people must assimilate or 'pass' as non-disabled in order to be valued. Through her writing, Benham positions herself as/within a global autistic epidemic: a 'repulsively yet beautifully contagious activism' (p. 1). Yet, exploring advocacy within austerity, Benham argues that autistic peer support only partially compensates for a distinct lack of appropriate services. Her mother's words, 'You can be anything you want' resonate throughout - and Benham questions the reality of this utterance under austerity. Benham's explorations also touch upon queerness and madness as identities that intersect, for her, with autism and disability. Drawing on Kafer's (2013) work around queer crip temporalities, Benham makes the case for desiring queerness and disability as always unfinished states. Ending her powerful piece, Benham writes, "When she was young her mother told her she could be anything but she never wanted to be anything else."

Many Disability Studies scholars will be familiar with Lennard Davis' (1995) work on the bell curve. In the final piece, *Reclaiming the Margins in The Face of the Quantified Self*, Gabi Schaffzin (n.d.) furthers Davis' work as he focuses on the power of statistics and data in new and emerging normalizing technologies. Similarly to Benham, Schaffzin also takes an autoethnographic approach as he theorizes his own relationships with the 'quantified self.' Here, however, Schaffzin's approach to ethnography is visual and digital: interpreting, exploring and critiquing data from his own 23andMe and Fitbit accounts. Schaffzin moves us to wonder about the impact of (now relatively mundane) technology which undoubtedly expects and desires particular bodies, minds and selves. Furthermore, Schaffzin highlights the problematic relationships between capitalism and quantified selves: from the political, as our intimate data 'are offered to corporations promising knowledge and freedom' to the practical and everyday; the ways that data is moved between (authorized and unauthorized) companies, for example, and decisions, such as insurance, made on its basis.

### Drawing Some Conclusions

To sum up, then, this forum offers an eclectic collection of thought-provoking and engaged articles that contest, challenge, and celebrate our original understandings of crip, fat, ugly and austerity. We extend great thanks to our contributors who have contributed such vibrant offerings. As a collection, the articles expose, critically resist and play with normative understandings of what bodies should do and be. As we have storied our process in this introduction, we have pinpointed some important inclusions and omissions - not only have race, queerness and fatness stayed relatively untouched, but austerity has been a lurking rather than explicit backdrop in the key contributions to this forum. In the current political context of rampant global neoliberalism, it is deeply important we keep pushing back at the always-narrowing boundaries that austerity-as-ideology brings to the body politic. We must keep at the forefront that neoliberal-ableism and global instability inevitably proffer new forms of

precarity that drive us, at best, back into the normative body and self and find creative, collectivist and connected ways to resist. Yet, as per our original call, we want to suggest – as Mingus (2011) does – that a way forward, or at least a place we might begin, is to work together to make space to imagine the Crip, the fat and the ugly as ‘our greatest strength’. We learned across this forum that while we may be ready for the revolutionary politics of Crip and Fat, ugly has got some way to go. It has become clear to us that reclaiming, respecting and loving ugly is an incomplete but, we hope, an emerging radical project that can enable connection and build coalition across marginalized people’s social movements.

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**Jen Slater** is a Reader in Disability Studies and Education in Sheffield Institute of Education, Sheffield Hallam University, UK. Their research focuses on issues of disability, gender and the body. They are also interested in critical explorations of developmental discourse and issues of access/accessibility. Jen draws on critical disability studies, queer theories and feminisms to explore how relationships between disability, gender, sexuality, race and youth/development function under (neo)liberal agendas of transnational capitalism. Their book, *Youth and Disability: A Challenge to Mr Reasonable* (2015), explores youth and disability as social, cultural and political constructs, alongside gender, sexuality and the body. They are co-editor of *Theorising Normalcy and the Mundane: Precarious Positions* (2016). More recent musings have taken place through a cross-disciplinary, arts-based research project called, *Around the Toilet*, which explores the toilet as an embodied space of exclusion and belonging ([www.aroundthetoilet.com](http://www.aroundthetoilet.com)). You can read more about Jen’s work at [www.jenslater.wordpress.com](http://www.jenslater.wordpress.com), or follow them on Twitter @jenslater\_

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### Endnotes

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[i] We follow others in using ‘body-minds’ in order to critique the Western separation of ‘body’ and ‘mind’, and the prioritisation of mind over body. For discussion see Clare (2017, pp. xv–xvii).