

Book review: Feminist Queer Crip by Alison Kafer

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Book Review: *Feminist Queer Crip* by Alison Kafer

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Through this book Kafer makes political the often implicit belief that we all desire the same future; namely, one without disability. She challenges us to imagine the future otherwise. There are themes of refusing futures set-out, community and possibility. Importantly, in line with her feminist, queer, crip approach (which is both methodology and content) Kafer isn't afraid to confront paradox and contradiction. Although she challenges the reader to consider the 'ableist failure of imagination' (p. 4), she acknowledges that this is difficult. She aids readers by taking us on a *feminist, crip, queer* journey through a range of what she exposes as seemingly diverse, but 'not-really-so-disparate' (p. 169) texts. Over seven chapters Kafer cleverly and unsentimentally entwines deep theoretical engagement with personal narrative, media stories, and activist endeavours; challenging us to consider how disabled/non-disabled binaries fit into discourses of ab/normal; body/mind; same/different; public/private; hope/despair; natural/unnatural; pure/impure; natural/technological; nature/human; them/us.

At no point is Kafer afraid to grapple with hard questions. Some criticise crip/queer approaches for forgetting the 'real' lives of disabled people (see, for example, Sherry's [2013] piece in *The Feminist Wire*). Yet, embodied lived-experiences are at the heart of this book. In the introductory chapter Kafer asks 'who can 'claim crip'?' She recognises that most disabled people don't claim crip (nor politically disabled identities). Yet she argues that to 'claim crip critically is to recognize the ethical, epistemic, and political responsibilities behind such claims; deconstructing the binary between disabled and able-bodied/able-minded requires *more* attention to how bodies/minds are treated differently, not less' (p. 13). To this end, in *Chapter One*, she importantly asks '[h]ow do I respond to the fact that the theories we deploy, the speculations we engage, play out differently across different bodies differently?' (p. 44) To respond to her own question, theoretical engagement cuts across movements and disciplines; engaging with disability studies (DS) and activism, black feminist texts, queer theories, environmental movements and ecofeminism. Furthermore, she is not only interested in places in which disability emerges, but also in places where it remains unspoken.

In *Chapter One* Kafer engages with critiques of heteronormative time coming from queer studies (Edelman, 2004; Halberstam, 2005), alongside accounts of 'crip time' (Chandler, 2010), asking, 'can we crip queer time?' (p. 27). Whereas queer theorists have responded to 'the future' through refusal, Kafer wants to imagine futures which 'cultivate disability'. In *Chapter Two* Kafer puts Ashley X at the centre of her desirably disabled future. She argues that those most peripheral should be at the centre of crip/queer activism. Kafer suggests the fear of/for Ashley was her 'embodied asynchrony'. The 'cure' therefore was to 're-synchronise', by ensuring Ashley's body remained childlike. Kafer also highlights, however,

that it wasn't just adulthood that was feared of/for Ashley; femaleness – particularly the possibility of pleasure within this femaleness - was seen as especially grotesque. So why, asks Kafer, didn't feminists speak up?

The lack of attention paid to disability within feminist movements is a continuing concern in the book. *Chapter Three* thinks this through by addressing the place of 'disability' within feminist utopian visions. Kafer reads Piercy's (1979), *Woman on the Edge of Time*, alongside the case of Candy McCullough and Sharon Duchesneau, a d/Deaf lesbian couple who actively sought a deaf baby. Pointing out a) the eugenic tendencies in much utopian writing (feminist and otherwise) and b) the criticism directed at McCullough and Duchesneau, Kafer again highlights disability's perceived threat to the future. For Kafer, the case of McCullough and Duchesneau provide a counter-narrative to normative ways of thinking. The importance of counter-narratives continues into *Chapter Four*, with an interrogation of billboards erected by *Foundation for a Better Life*. These billboards used a variety of images of disabled people to remind an assumed non-disabled audience that, 'it would be worse, you could be disabled'. Challenging these harmful, individualistic narratives Kafer reimagines mantras of 'courage', 'determination' and 'opportunity' to 'envision a media campaign that favours *dissent* at least as much as unity, that recognizes political protest and activism as signs of courage, that is as concerned with collective responsibility and accountability as personal' (p. 100). Kafer ends this chapter with a tail of her own crip activism.

In *Chapter Five* Kafer suggests that as discussions of the cyborg (Haraway, 1990) are one of the rare places disability continually appears within feminist texts, disability scholars need to attend to cyborg theory. She highlights the ableism often apparent in these texts: with disabled people separated as an essential state of cyborg, non-disabled people will never achieve. For Kafer, a non-ableist cyborg politics would mean refusing 'to isolate those of us cyborged through illness of disability from other cyborgs' (p. 118). She calls for attention to the 'material realities' of disabled people, and stresses thinking of the cyborg as about relational political practices, rather than essentialist readings of ab/normal bodies/minds. *Chapter Six* does similarly important 'interventionist' work by placing disability within environmental politics. Drawing on the work of Eli Clare (1999), Kafer asks how we can 'crip the trail map' (p. 140) through stories of crip embodiment in nature.

The final chapter connects feminist queer crip writing and movements through three points of concern: bathroom politics, environmental justice and reproductive justice. The blurring activism and the academy is one of the most exciting points of this book. Kafer makes clear that her analyses are not 'conclusions', rather they are 'answers in progress, partial attempts to think disability otherwise' (p.171). To this end, there is no concluding chapter, instead, three appendices of 'activist presents' accompany the book. Firstly, a checklist by *People In Search of Safe and Accessible Restrooms* (PISSAR), a campaigning group which link disability and gender access; secondly, a leaflet distributed by activists with multiple chemical sensitivities relating DS to environmental justice campaigns; and finally, a letter written by a group of 'people committed to both disability rights and reproductive rights' (p.177). This book will interest activists, students and academics, working along *feminist, queer, crip* lines, to imagine futures otherwise. Although some chapters may be tricky for

those unfamiliar with the texts discussed, every chapter – not least the activist presents - provides a beginning for dialogue of tricky subjects which too often remain silent.

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