

CRIP-FEMME-ININITY

Christine Bylund

Frida. If they knew.

They think you are such a symbol. Look at that, she's got *one* eyebrow! I see your picture in one of the most inaccessible places I know.

Their bodies are strong and hard, they can carry the queer revolution.
But would they have carried you?

We walk around amongst your things at the museum.
Your bed. Your empty medicine bottles. Your lipstick.

I read that he thought you dressed as if someone had tied a ribbon to a bomb.

Frida. I stop at your paintings. The one with your back and all the vertebrae. The nails.

The one with the unborn child. Everything is hovering over you.
Blood and membranes.

Frida. If they knew.

That you painted the hammer and sickle on your corsets.

Now a mug with your face on can be sold for 200 SEK.

I know, because I have one.

Frida.

I want to crawl under your duvet.

Your back. Your leg.

Steel and rails.

Frida. Who helped you?

With food. Clothes.

Who held out their palm so you could nibble at the pills?

Relief and rest.

Frida.

I think of that photo where you paint with your upper body supported in the wheelchair.

Tied up like the stem of a flower with wide white ribbons.

They don't make *that* into a t-shirt print.

THIS TEXT PRESENTS the concept of crip-femme-ininity and discusses its critical potential in times of austerity; it does so in relation to texts of theory and memoir that have been crucial to my own crip-femme awakening, both personally and academically.

However, as a conscious attempt to step away from the ableist need for a confession of a dis/abled¹ person's personal account as an empirical example, I seek to tie the acts of self-presentation to a bio-political bureaucratic and material production of power and possibility.

In the introduction, I turn to one of the most popular feminist icons of contemporary times, Frida Kahlo. In her self-presentation and through her art Kahlo can be said to turn to the queer femme-inine idea of excess, challenging normative ideas of white abled-bodied femininity and as a result becoming an example of the subversive potential of the femme. However, the narrative of illness and dis/ability in Kahlo's everyday life and art is often overlooked or *cripwashed*² in the use of her image in a predominantly abled-bodied feminist culture. In the case of Kahlo, such cripwashing may take the form of hosting Frida Kahlo-themed par-

ties in inaccessible venues, or not engaging with the representation of dis/ability, pain, and illness in her self-presentation and work.

In *Crip Theory* (2006), Robert McRuer builds on the work of critical disability studies scholars and disability rights activists, to propose an understanding of dis/ability as a continuous performance. A performance that either complies with, or deviates from, a cultural norm of ableism, a bio-political system of power promoting and safe-guarding those understood as abled-bodied. McRuer (2006) presents *crip* as a theoretical tool and personal identity akin to that of queer theory and the queer identity – a position to *choose* and *act* from.³

Femme can at first hand be understood as one part of a dichotomy within a butch/femme relationship. However, in a queer framework the femme is not a half waiting to make a whole. The queer femme seeks to disturb and subvert the heterosexist patriarchal understanding of femininity, gender, and desire through the intent use of its tools and techniques of self-representation (Dahl 2012; 2017).

In an ableist society, where dis/abled people often are understood as lacking both the ability and the need to preform, both gender and sexuality, the pairing of dis/abled bodies and minds with femme-ininity, is not a match *supposed* to be made. Crip-femme dancer and writer Leslie Freeman (2009) writes about the role of ableism in the construction of a femme image:

You don't see dis/abled femme, because, in your head, these words negate each other. I am femme: pretty and feminine. /.../ Dis/ability means weakness, sexless passivity – ugly. (Freeman 2009, 17)

[But] my femme is my embodied history, inseparable from my dis/ability.

(22)

Following Freeman's reasoning crip-femme is a subversion of hegemonic patriarchal notions of femininity, as well as of ableist understandings of the dis/abled body as de-gendered and undesirable, even within queer culture. *Crip-femme* is a position of active resistance, aligning itself with McRuer's (2018, 23) understanding of crip as a *verb*, forming itself in

action. To perform crip-femme-ininity is to pull the expression of gender from the hands of ableism, rejecting the notion of the dis/abled person as a de-gendered object, forming a subject position which takes into account both dis/ability, gender, and sexuality.

In the article “Femmebodiment: Notes on Queer Feminine Shapes of Vulnerability” (2017), Ulrika Dahl discusses how the notion of vulnerability can be said to be a core concepts from which femme-ininity is both understood and represented. From a crip-theoretical position studying the *effects of ableism* (cf., Campbell 2009), I am not interested in making a claim to how dis/ability ties in with a *general* understanding of human vulnerability or mortality. Rather, I am interested in how a bio-political bureaucratic system, creates a heightened state of *specific* vulnerability in comparison to those understood as able-bodied. From this point of departure, the notion of vulnerability is one unevenly distributed within the femme collective.

But, in these dire times of dis/abled people suffering, *grave violations of human rights* (Ryan 2019), as it was stated by the UN’s ECHR report on the situation in the U.K., why is the concept of crip-femme-ininity one to focus on?

I would argue that it is so since, as Dahl (2017, 41) writes, the femme identity and position is made up of *everyday techniques of the self*, given meaning within a cultural context. In this text, that cultural context is the one of a contemporary political landscape of ableist austerity; sanctions specifically targeting the economic and social wellbeing of dis/abled people. My reasoning on the critical potential of crip femme-ininity takes its painful points of departure from austerity politics in Sweden and the U.K., which has rendered dis/abled people poor, housebound, dependent on family and friends and in the worst case dead. (McRuer 2018; Järkestig Berggren et al. 2019; Ryan 2019). From this point of departures, access to adequate support for performing the techniques of everyday life, such as dressing and undressing and personal hygiene, are human rights for dis/abled people under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2007) (cf., Ryan 2019). As a result of ableist politics human rights to self-presentation and self-preservation are violated.

In a Swedish landscape of ableist austerity, the femme-inine technique of applying and removing make-up has become a principal question: Should dis/abled people have access to personal assistance to perform it? Following new guidelines for personal assistance presented by Försäkringskassan, the Swedish social insurance agency, its representatives states that the need for personal hygiene that grants personal assistance is only that of keeping “oneself clean” (Assistanskoll 2017; RBU 2019).

Yet again the ableist understanding of dis/abled people as de-gendered is evident. We are not perceived as having the *need* to perform the acts of gender, whichever they may be. For the crip-femme, the techniques discussed by Dahl (2017) become intertwined with a concrete possibility regulated by a bureaucratic and political system by either granting or refusing it, in a practical sense orienting the self to and from both cultural and personal ideas of gendered self-presentations such as femininity and carrying with it a rippling effect that impacts personal expression, sexual identity and practice, and relationship formations.

Chronically ill writer Peggy Munson (2009, 29–36) speaks of herself and femmes like her as “fringe dwellers” who do not have “the luxury of abstract theory.” Although femme theory can be said to engage with the embodiment of gender in less than abstract ways both inside and outside of academia, the theory thereof is often produced and presented in spaces and places both cognitively and physically inaccessible. Munson’s (2009) idea of a fringe of femme-ness for those living on the margins of both ableist society and the femme-identity and experience, paired with the example of make-up presented above, the role of ableism in a hegemonic queer femme culture and its focus on visibility and the ability to perform certain gendered techniques becomes evident. Through the pairing of crip and femme as a critical tool it is possible to examine the ableist bio-political conditions and understandings which produces that fringe, marginalising those femmes who due to sensory sensitivities, physical, and cognitive dispositions or lack of support and services in everyday life are unable to perform techniques understood as hegemonic.

The pairing of *crip* and *femme* hence, offers a position to critically deconstruct the upholding of ableism within queer community and queer culture itself. In doing so, it links the theoretical understanding of dis/ability and gender as a performative act to a bio-politically conditioned and embodied time, space and place, presenting a tool for averting the (temporarily) abled-bodied scholars' interest disability and crip theory as an abstract playground for the mind.

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NOTES

1. I present the term this way to signal an understanding of “disability” as something that is created in a relation between cultural understandings of able-bodiedness, physical, mental, and cognitive predisposition and material and political discourses within a specific society. In Swedish, I would rather have used the term *normbrytande funktionalitet*.
2. Robert McRuer (2018, 23) presents the term in *Crip Times* to describe the use of dis/abled peoples’ experience as a token on a commercial level, as a kin to the terms pink- or greenwashing.
3. McRuer (2006; 2018), Fiona Kumari Campbell (2009), and Alison Kafer (2013) amongst others, have continued to critically engage crip-theoretically with the upholding and effects of ableism and its intersectional relation to structures of powers surrounding gender, sexuality, and race.