

Crip heroes and social change

THIS ARTICLE PRESENTS a critical reading of Robert McRuer's *Crip Theory: cultural signs of queerness and disability* (2006), in which the author, a professor of English, explores common ground between disability studies and queer theory. The conjunction of the two has been rare (Grönvik 2008:48; Kafer 2009:291) but does appear in a special edition of the magazine *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* for which McRuer was one of several guest editors (2003). The aim of the present article is two-fold. First, the consequences of McRuer's choice of empirical data for Crip Theory are analysed. Second, the relevance of Crip Theory for a study on how female athletes with physical impairments relate to their bodies and to the field of sports is examined.

Method

The study has an intersectional approach, focusing on gender, age, and disability. To get an initial understanding of the field, participant observation was made at a disability sports camp for young people with physical or intellectual impairments (or both) and at four disability sports contests – one national and three international.

Ten semi-structured interviews were done with young women aged 15 to 27, in addition to informal interviews with six leaders, coaches, and volunteers. In order to grasp the experience of disability from the point of view of the young women studied, three of the participants were asked to keep video diaries. A small camcorder and a lightweight tripod were lent to them, and they were asked to videotape their daily lives, as though they were going to show them to a stranger. This made possible the collection of not only data, but also facial expressions and body language.

The participants were recruited from both the sports camp and disability sports clubs. They played sledge hockey, wheelchair basketball, table tennis, and rode on horseback. Since female teams are rare within Swedish sports for disabled persons, women must play on mixed teams, where they are in the minority. For this reason, both team and individual sports were included in the study. Two striking results were noted: the young women resisted the patronising attitude that victimises them, and they wanted to be treated as everyone else.¹

The normal body

McRuer introduces the notion of a system of compulsory able-bodiedness. He shows how it produces disability and is interwoven with compulsory heterosexuality, drawing parallels between able-bodiedness and heterosexuality. Both are defined by their opposites, and both are connected to an idea of normality (2006:8). It is considered self-evident that having a body and living a life without a disability are preferable to being a person with a disability. Old ideas about homosexuality as a mental or physical illness or as a deviation from a heterosexual, healthy, true identity linger on and show how compulsory heterosexuality is associated with being able-

bodied. The disabled body, on the other hand, is often constructed as asexual and non-gendered, or – when it comes to intellectual disabilities – as overly sexual (Grönvik 2008:53; Malmberg 2002; Marston & Atkins 1999:89; Reinikainen 2004). However, McRuer does not discuss how these ideas about the disabled body are connected to compulsory heterosexuality.

McRuer partly shifts focus from a view of a disabled body as problematical to the supposedly normal, heterosexual, able body. This is quite unusual within empirical disability research, in contrast to research about gender, class, ethnicity or race, and sexuality, which studies dominant groups, as, for example, in men's studies and whiteness studies (Grönvik & Söder 2008:19). Philosopher Margrit Shildrick, among others, has used the monster metaphor theoretically, in addition to the notion of the abject, to explore how disabled people as well as "women, racial others, the sick, the monstrous [...] serve to define by difference the self's own parameters" (2000:216). McRuer also calls attention to "able-bodiedness" being an even more naturalised non-identity than heterosexuality (2006:1).

Being able-bodied seems to be naturalised in the Swedish context as well. The Swedish language has no term for the English "able-bodied", except for the negative form "not disabled" (*icke funktionsnedsatt*). Researchers have called attention to the fact that within Swedish disability research and public debate disabled people are often constructed as weak and problematic. Sociologist Mårten Söder (2005) claims that by taking this viewpoint researchers run the risk of reproducing the prevailing understandings of what living with a disability is like and of missing inherent complexities. On the one hand, research findings of a high quality of life reported by disabled people are explained away as a lowered level of expectation. On the other hand, demands made by disabled people and

their relatives are also dismissed as unrealistic, and such individuals are accused of not having accepted their disability (Söder 2005:97). Whereas Söder, however, does not focus on the norm, economic historian Paulina de los Reyes does (2000). She states that instead of pointing out structural obstacles to these groups' participation in work life, Swedish disability researchers stress the responsibility of the individual as deficits, limitations, and deviances are contrasted with the invisible norm of the strong, able-bodied worker (de los Reyes 2000: 25).

Coming out cripp

The term "cripp" is not substantial but positional, according to McRuer (2006:31). He wants to create a critical space from which it is possible for people without disabilities to "come out cripp" as well. One possible point of view is that we all, in fact, are "virtually disabled" (30). For one thing, the able-bodied norm is impossible to achieve. Moreover, we will most probably all be disabled if we live long enough to grow old. One proponent of this viewpoint is sociologist Bryan S. Turner, who introduces the idea of a universal, biological insecurity that includes biological frailty, social vulnerability, and societal precariousness. Illness, injuries, and aging can lead to isolation, marginalisation, and dependency, and although the state protects society it can constitute a threat to its citizens as when policy decisions such as compulsory retirement have unfortunate consequences for the individual (Turner 2001:262–263). However, there is a considerable difference between those who find themselves presently disabled and those who are not yet so. The idea that everybody is or will be disabled can also lead to denied rights for disabled people, for if everybody is disabled, why should some have more support than others (McRuer 2006:157)?

Another way to position oneself more fruitfully (according to McRuer) is as "critically/severely disabled", i.e., as crip:

"Severely disabled" [...] would reverse the able-bodied understanding of severely disabled bodies as the most marginalised, the most excluded from a privileged and always elusive normalcy, and would instead suggest that it is precisely those bodies that are best positioned to refuse "mere toleration" and to call out the inadequacies of compulsory able-bodiedness. (2006:31)

Severely disabled bodies are thus celebrated and politicised. From the subject position as "crip", the deficits of compulsory able-bodiedness are easily made visible. McRuer thus advocates a renewal of identity politics and an expanded notion of identity: a non-individual, collective crip subjectivity (2006:52). An individual can come out by engaging in an act of solidarity. McRuer also mentions political coalitions in both local and global contexts (2006:61, 202), but without specifying them.

Neoliberal flexibility

McRuer's analysis is set in the contemporary political and economic context of the United States. Neoliberal politics have resulted in a free flow of capital, a deregulated commodities market, and privatisation of the public sector. Within economic discourse, flexibility has characterised production and the workforce by the traits of activity, mobility, and new ways of thinking. The other side of flexibility, however, is job insecurity and demands for submissiveness and compliance. The liberalisation of the market has led to an upward redistribution of welfare, greater inequality, and oppression, all facilitated by the culturally positive valuation of flexibility (2006:16–17).

Neoliberalism has also brought about changes for disabled people in Sweden. Although the universal ideal of the Swedish welfare system is still predominant, there have been retrenchments during the 1990s, and Swedish disability policies have changed to a "deservingness ethic" (Lindqvist 2000:412). In the 1990s selective social and civil rights were introduced. Together with decentralisation, these have led to differences, depending on one's residence and socio-economical status. Thus, a disability policy characterised by "an emphasis on politics, collective organising, and equality [has shifted] to an emphasis on market, individualism, and freedom" (Barron et al. 2000:138; translation by the author). The universalistic welfare state has become a neoliberal one (Lindqvist 2000:413), inspired by the market-oriented welfare model of the United States (Hvinden 2004:185). Those entitled to the new selective support system have received increased freedom of choice (Barron et al. 2000:151). However, large groups of disabled people who previously received universal benefits are not entitled to the new support, and risk being passed over. Competition to qualify for this special support is expected to increase (142).

Difference and tolerance are also among the terms celebrated within neoliberalism, according to McRuer. When homosexuals and disabled people in the United States demonstrated for their rights during the 1960s and 1970s, the previously naturalised able-bodied and heterosexual subject was made visible. Able-bodied and heterosexual individuals found themselves in a crisis situation, which they handled by exercising tolerance. Those people now cooperate with homosexuals and disabled people "in a discursive climate of tolerance" to which the latter have to adjust (2006:18). But although diversity is highly valued in the United States, homosexuals and disabled people are still subordinated. While cultural

representations no longer depict them as overtly objectified freaks, they continue to be visually and narratively subordinated, if not completely erased (28). A new and more flexible homophobia that discriminates in favour of able-bodied people (ableism) has thus developed. It is against this discursive climate of flexibility, tolerance, and diversity that Crip Theory directs its criticism.

Rehabilitation and degradation

Like several earlier researchers (Grue & Heiberg 2006; Hughes 2000; Moser 2006; Turner 2001), McRuer emphasises the normalising effects of rehabilitation. He claims that rehabilitation demands obedience: "What we might call the rehabilitative contract [...] essentially stipulates that, in return for integration, no complaints will be made, no suggestions for how the world, and not the disabled body and mind, might be molded differently" (2006:112–113).

The complexity of rehabilitation is exemplified by McRuer's analysis of Susana Aikin and Carlos Aparicio's 1996 documentary *The Transformation*, which follows an ex-Cuban named Sara from her life as a transvestite on the streets of New York City to her new identity as Ricardo in a fundamentalist Christian community in Dallas, Texas. Sara was living with AIDS and needed health care and a place to live. In the film she says that in the United States "if you have no money, you are nothing" (McRuer 2006:118). Sara was rehabilitated by representatives of a religious organisation to a life as Ricardo, which included a home, a heterosexual marriage, a job (that he did not choose), and conformity with regard to religion, language, and gender (119). She was thus transformed to a normality that those making all the decisions considered a return to the time preceding the identity as Sara, and as a natural consequence of the rehabilitation. Her former life as Sara was silenced. But with the

rehabilitation to Ricardo, McRuer emphasises, degradation also follows. Autonomy, subjectivity, and dignity were lost when Sara went through the transformation. "Ricardo" now works in the Christian community, travelling and testifying about his life, but when interviewed in *The Transformation* he says that if he had been given a choice, he would have opted to be a woman. However, he had no alternative.

Sara's story is an example of how compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory heterosexuality are intertwined. From the perspective of the church's representatives it was not only AIDS that made Sara ill. They saw her gender and sexuality as a part of what needed to be adjusted. In this way they linked gender and sexuality to disability and rehabilitation.

Noncompliance and moving across boundaries

The crossing of boundaries is a recurrent theme in McRuer's analyses. One example, in which the compliance of rehabilitation and its demand for conformity is questioned, is his analysis of the author, musician, and artist Bob Flanagan's performances. Flanagan, who was born in 1952, was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis early in life. This hereditary disease causes breathing difficulties and a heightened risk of infection because of thick mucus produced in the lungs. Sickness and death, in combination with sadomasochistic sex, became central themes in his work. When he died in 1996 at the age of 44, critics had long marvelled that he had lived so long. Flanagan used to echo this in his performances: "'Bob Flanagan should be dead already,' that's what they say. . . . Instead, he nails his dick to a board" (Flanagan, cited by McRuer 2006:188). When his intimate and artistic partner Sheree Rose whipped Flanagan on stage, it gave him sexual pleasure and also helped clear his lungs of mucus. They

performed together at S/M clubs and established art institutions.

McRuer regards Flanagan's performances as counter-hegemonic: they went against the celebration of the strong healthy body and the compliant family, against benevolence, tolerant multi-culturalism, and compulsory consumption. Flanagan celebrated sickness, perversion, and an alternative way of life. As McRuer points out, while disability researchers combat metaphors of sickness and deviance, Flanagan appropriated those metaphors and extended their limits (2006:183–184). Flanagan had once been a poster child for a cystic fibrosis foundation. Those sweet pictures evoke pity and attract resources to help people afflicted with the disease. But McRuer argues that "one dominant effect of the image is to shut down other possibilities for thinking about identity, community, democracy, and justice" (2006: 82), that is, they preclude an expanded discussion of social justice. In his adult life, Flanagan undermined the picture of the asexual, sick child and showed another way of surviving – not as a weak recipient of care and benevolence, but as an active performer.

The importance of Flanagan's crossing of limits becomes evident in Kirby Dick's 1997 documentary *Sick: The life and death of Bob Flanagan, supermasochist*. In the film 17-year-old Sara pays a visit to Flanagan. Her travel and hotel expenses were paid by the Make-a-Wish foundation, a privately financed U.S. charity that has been operating since the 1980s to enable terminally ill children to fulfil a special wish. Sara, who also has cystic fibrosis, explains that she wanted to meet Flanagan because he shows that, despite the disease, it is possible to take control over one's body. By choosing to meet a person with cystic fibrosis who presents an image opposed to one of life as sick, rather than selecting a more traditional destination like Disneyland, Sara also challenged the view of sick young people as passive consumers (McRuer 2006:189–191).

The limits of boundaries crossing

McRuer combines poststructuralist text analysis with materialist studies of how meaning is produced within economic relations. Those relations constrain and enable culture and social change without being deterministic (2006:210). However, he only mentions social class as a structuring category in cases when it creates subordination. In his analysis of the Aparicio documentary, he concludes that a lack of money, together with homelessness and illness, are the reasons for Sara/Ricardo to accept the offer of rehabilitation from the church. But in the examples McRuer gives of successfully crossing boundaries and non-compliance, the aspect of class is not taken into account. Those crossings are almost exclusively done by people with a college education.

In a legal case discussed by McRuer that attracted much attention, Karen Thompson, an assistant professor of physical education and recreation, fought for and was granted custody of her partner, Sharon Kowalski, who was seriously injured in a car accident. In doing so, she succeeded in getting their lesbian relationship recognised. The process is described in *Why can't Sharon Kowalski come home?* written by Thompson together with sociologist Julie Andrzejewski (1988). Kowalski's parents wanted to place their daughter in a nursing home. "For them, able-bodied/heterosexual normalcy began at home, and if Sharon could not return to such a state of normalcy, then she would have to remain incarcerated" (McRuer 2006: 104). Thompson was ultimately allowed to provide Kowalski with alternative rehabilitation in their shared home.

In yet another analysis we meet poet Gary Fisher. During his four years of college, he took a class from queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. They also carried on a correspondence, which continued until Fisher died of AIDS-related causes in 1994. In letters, poems,

and a diary Fisher wrote a critique of rehabilitation, benevolence, and his desire (in sadomasochistic fantasies) to be degraded. Others would not have known about his critique if Fisher had not had a social network. Sedgwick edited and published a posthumous collection of Fisher's writings in the anthology *Gary in your pocket: stories and notebooks of Gary Fisher* (1996).

Flanagan, who also was educated and well established as a performer, was a boundary crosser too, highly critical of the art world of which he was a part. Nevertheless, his position involves prestige, fame, and social contacts. Flanagan was a significant role model who questioned myths about sickness. But while Sara/Ricardo did not have economic, cultural, or social capital, Thompson had all of that, and Fisher and Flanagan had at least cultural and social capital. The differences in resources permitted different courses of action. The idea of stretching or crossing boundaries has been looked at critically by earlier researchers, who observe that the possibilities for either differ, depending on one's social position (McNay 2004; Mulinari & Sandell 1999). Noncompliance and moving across boundaries as a political strategy for social change are not available to everyone.

An example from my own study may suggest how social class matters: 17-year-old Maria (all names used are pseudonyms) considers herself a fighter. Criticising the treatment she gets from people on a regular basis, she claims that "the worst thing you can do is to pity someone". Such pity may be dependent on gender. Since she is a woman, Maria risks being regarded as a victim when she describes how she has been discriminated against. People often ascribe passivity and helplessness to her because of her disability. In her video diary she tells about a teacher in school who asked her to give a talk about "difficulties in the everyday life of a disabled person". This was

apparently a gesture of open-mindedness that McRuer would call an expression of the "discursive climate of tolerance". At the same time the teacher was subordinating Maria as problematic and needy. In the talk she gave, Maria only spoke of positive experiences to avoid being positioned as a "poor cripple".

Reluctance to be forced into this position was also present when Maria, who recently took her driving test, applied for an allowance from the Social Insurance Administration (*Försäkringskassan*) for the purchase of a car. She also requested funds to have the car modified for her use (she needs hand controls to operate the accelerator and brake since she cannot use her feet). "[It was] quite a long process. [...] It involved, among other things, a telephone interview with a lady from the Social Insurance Administration", said Maria. She got the adaptation allowance, but not the money for the purchase of a car. Maria explains what she thought was behind that decision:

I can walk a few hundred meters. But what I didn't say [during the interview] is that after I walk 100 meters, I am dead tired, and can remain like that for the rest of the day. That kind of thing was probably the reason [the application was denied]. I was simply too positive, I didn't complain enough. [...] We have appealed, and now the case will be heard by the County Administrative Court. I got support from my doctor, who gave me a certificate and we will get more help from an occupational therapist. [...] Plus, my dad is a lawyer so he knows about these things, and that's fortunate. Contacts are everything! (video diary 2008)

Again Maria refused to present herself as weak and needy. She prefers to be seen as "disabled and proud", rather than pitiful. With the social, cultural, and economic capital she has as a lawyer's daughter,

there is room for her to take a stand since she has the resources needed in this situation.

McRuer sketches a future study of disability research on "global bodies", i.e., people who are either European or North American. He cautions that simply expanding such research, along with the theoretical frameworks and concepts it has produced, would not work, since it is tied to one geographical area. He also stresses that claiming the same research results to be valid for people all over the world would lead to colonisation, not coalition (2006:202). But McRuer risks doing this himself when he fails to include the significance of class in his analysis. As a result, he makes strategies that are only available to more privileged groups in society seem universal.²

McRuer also portrays the expansion and crossing of boundaries as generally free from conflict, while several other researchers stress the personal risk-taking that such action involves and the punishment that often follows (Bordo 2004:298; Mulinari & Sandell 1999:293; Pratt 1991). In "Identity: skin blood heart" (1991), feminist scholar Minnie Bruce Pratt describes how moving across boundaries resulted in her being severely punished when, as a lesbian, she stepped out of the white heterosexual woman's "circle of protection":

Raised to believe that I could be where I wanted and have what I wanted and be who I wanted, as a grown woman I thought I could simply claim my desire, even if this was the making of a new place to live with other women. I had no understanding of the limits that I lived within; nor of how much my memory and my experience of a safe space was based on places that had been secured for me by omission, exclusion, or violence; nor that my continued safety meant submitting to those very limits. (1991)

Not until afterwards did Pratt recognise how unique her earlier privileges were and the cost they entailed in terms of subordination and exclusion of others, sometimes with outright violence. She later experienced this exclusion herself.

Crip heroes and a normative femininity

McRuer offers examples of radical artists, authors, and documentary filmmakers in support of his arguments. Those are the revolutionary heroes of Crip Theory. Paradoxically, such people are not very different from what used to be called "supercrips" (a media portrayal of someone who is physically impaired but gets attention for his or her unexpected success). Rather than being the player of what is regarded as deviant, as was Flanagan, the stereotypical supercrip challenges the picture of disabled people as tragic individuals by a display of extraordinary physical strength and endurance, despite having an alleged deficiency. Earlier researchers have pointed out that disabled people remind all of us how vulnerable the human body is (Shildrick 2000; Wendell 1997:268). Philosopher Susan Wendell claims that supercrips (or "disabled heroes", as she calls them) are reassuring to able-bodied people, as they show that it is possible to assert control over one's body (1997:271).

However, like McRuer's crip heroes, such individuals have to be analysed in their context. Often they have social, economic, and physical resources, which other disabled people lack (Berger 2004:801; Wendell 1997:271). For many people, living with their impairment consumes so much energy that no room is left for such feats as climbing mountains or pursuing gold medals in the Paralympics. The stereotype thus creates an ideal that is unattainable for most disabled people, and their position as Other is strengthened (Wendell 1997:271).

While supercrips and crip heroes like Flanagan and Fisher can be inspiring, they are far removed from the everyday lives of the people I spoke with. The participants in my project do not want to be marginalised, but they lack the resources to be supercrips, and in several cases what they strive for is normalcy. This may be seen in a desire to present oneself as a "normal", heterosexual teenage girl. Josefin, who is 20 years old, shows that she is well aware of how politically charged terms are when she discusses the Swedish sports movement's reluctance to invest in sports for disabled people. "The Swedish system is not built to accommodate those of us who are cripples [*skruppel*]. [...] – I was about to say invalids [*invalider*]. You had better write 'disabled'! [laughs]" When she tells what she did besides sports in her leisure time, she shows two sides of herself: "Of course, I have been doing things like everybody else who is 15 – getting dead drunk. [...] It isn't as if I am the nicest child in the world". Frequenting pubs, she met with some strong reactions: "Shit, she is drunk! And she has a disability!" Later in the interview, she tells about her boyfriends:

I had one disabled boyfriend. Otherwise, I've always had healthy boyfriends – if I can put it like that! [laughs] It sounds a bit stupid, so maybe I should say 'not disabled'.[...] Well, I seem to have had a number of them. It's not exactly like that, but [laughs] I have had three or four of them that have been serious. (recorded interview 2006)

Josefin refers to her boyfriends as "healthy", and presents herself as sick by contrast. As when she called disabled sportspeople "cripples" and "invalids", she takes up a crip subject position. At the same time she approaches the norm by pointing out that she is heterosexual,

and that she attracts able-bodied boys. But she also carefully positions herself within the narrow limits of the "normal" heterosexual teenage girl. On the one hand, she opposes the view of disabled young people (especially women) as passive, overprotected, and lacking independence by relating that she goes to pubs, drinks alcohol, gets drunk, and has sex. On the other hand, she characterises herself as on the respectable side when she notes that the number of her boyfriends has been limited, implying that she has not simply been running around.

The same striving for normalcy also appears in the activities of a women's group within a disability sports club. The group was started because of the sexism some of the women had encountered in pursuing disability sports, and the fact that women are in the minority in such settings. The group introduces young women to different sports, emphasising equality and trying to raise each member's consciousness about their situation as disabled. In addition to discussions, group exercise, sports, and moviegoing, other traditionally feminine activities were arranged, such as a session at a cosmetics store or fashion shows open to the public featuring women in wheelchairs as models. In light of the construction of the disabled body as non-gendered and asexual, the participants' desire for normalcy becomes understandable. The make-up class and fashion shows, as well as Josefin's talk about having a few, serious boyfriends, are ways to construct a more traditional and normative femininity in opposition to the older, stereotypical view of women with physical impairments.

The object

The striving for normalisation in the empirical material that cannot be analysed with the aid of Crip Theory can instead be explained

by the notion of the abject. This concept also enables a deepened understanding of how the dichotomy of the degraded versus the normal body is constructed. In addition, it can be used to question compulsory able-bodiedness and heterosexuality. The philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva claims that the self must expel the abject in order to secure a clean, proper, and socialised body. "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 1982:4). She suggests that the abject originates from a child's ambivalent struggle to separate from its mother's body, which is simultaneously the body that nourishes and comforts it (Young 1990:143). The movement is a two-fold one: the subject is fascinated and attracted to the object, then overcome by fear and retreats from it. This negative pole of the subject's reaction is transferred to the other body and regarded as inherent in it (i.e., other bodies are looked upon as fearful in themselves). The origin of this feeling in the subject's own emotions is concealed (Ahmed 2004:11).

Feminist scholar Anne McClintock has developed Kristeva's notion of abjection into a culturally and historically situated psychoanalytic system. McClintock maintains that abjection is crucial to the formation of modern imperialistic and industrial society: "Abject peoples are those whom industrial imperialism rejects but cannot do without" (1995:72). McClintock makes useful distinctions, which can be employed in the analysis of Sara's transformation into Ricardo. She writes of abject objects (bodily fluids), abject states (having an impairment or living with AIDS), abject zones (the neighbourhood where Sara lived), socially appointed agents of abjection (the representatives of a fundamentalist Christian community in the case of Sara/Ricardo), socially abject groups (the

prostituted transvestites with whom Sara was living), psychic processes of abjection (the church representative's feelings of fright and disgust towards the transvestites), and political processes of abjection (Sara/Ricardo's transformation). These elements are distinct but interrelated. McClintock's classification makes it possible to use the notion of abjection for analysis on both the micro and the macro level.

Othring, which has its basis in abjection, also emerged in the empirical material. Josefin describes herself as an active child. She rode a bicycle and played football and tennis with the children in the neighbourhood. "Before I began school [...] I can't say that I knew I had a disability. [...] I didn't see it as a big difference. It's like you are sitting here wearing glasses but *I* don't wear glasses". But when she went to school Josefin's situation changed radically:

Gymnastics was tough. I didn't dare shower with the others because of my spina bifida. My feet weren't shaped like the other kids, and my legs, and so on. [...] I also had to wear incontinence diapers until I was nine, and you could see them a little through my shorts. It was embarrassing as hell! (recorded interview 2006)

Spina bifida has rendered Josefin incontinent. She is in an abject state, according to McClintock's term. Geographer Robyn Longhurst has developed the spatial aspect of the notion of abjection. She regards the body and the intimate "rooms" that it inhabits as *close* as well as *closet* spaces: "They are close spaces in that they are familiar, near and intimate. They are also closet spaces in that they are often socially constructed as too familiar, near, intimate and threatening to be disclosed publicly". The subject feels ambivalence towards both the body as space and the body's space (Longhurst 2003:123).

Josefin's body looked different than the other kids and became a close(t) space that she felt obliged to hide. Josefin continues:

I had a handicapped bathroom at school where I had a bench with my things – catheters and diapers [...] and panty liners and everything, and an extra change of clothes, just in case I had an "accident". Then one day when I came in some kids had taken all those things and hung them all over the school. (recorded interview 2006)

The handicapped bathroom is Josefin's intimate space and the diapers tell about her bodily fluids and the threat of leakage. The brutal disclosure of the body as space and the body's space is a fact. When Josefin began school and was bullied, she went home and asked her parents why it happened, and they explained that she was different from other kids. This was the first time Josefin realised that she had an impairment. At that moment she became (socially constructed as) disabled.

Political scientist Iris Marion Young stresses the advantages of including the notion of abjection in analysing social discrimination:

An account of racism, sexism, and homophobia that includes an understanding of the deep threats to identity that difference poses for many people helps account not only for such acts themselves, but for a social climate that makes them institutional possibilities. (1990:149)

Such analysis can thus unmask our contemporary (seemingly tolerant and inclusive) social climate and the new homophobia and ableism it has brought about. It can also explain why the partici-

pants preferred processes of normalisation that allowed them to move from a minority to a majority position instead of remaining as members of a socially abjected group.

Conclusion

McRuer's shift of focus from the disabled body to compulsory able-bodiedness is instructive, although how it correlates with compulsory heterosexuality is not fully developed in theory. He also shows how rehabilitation runs the risk of resulting in degradation. As an activist, McRuer strives for social change: "An accessible world is possible [...] constructed in opposition to neoliberalism. [...] A disabled world is possible and desirable" (2006:71). Accessibility may here be understood in a wider sense as available communication, information, and universal design in the built environment, but also as changed attitudes and increased knowledge. The subject position of being a disabled person has been made desirable by the *crip* identity that McRuer suggests. On the one hand, this new world may be attained by non-compliance and crossing of boundaries. McRuer shows how the construction of the disabled or sick body, and the neoliberal, flexible tolerance towards those bodies, has been criticised, and limits defied and moved. However, such individual action requires access to economic, cultural, and social capital, and is not available for everyone. On the other hand, changes may be attempted through political coalitions, although McRuer seems vague on this point. One of the risks of operating through a non-individual, collective *crip* subjectivity is that the lived experience of disability becomes a metaphor and the identity of being disabled dematerialises.

Like *supercrips*, McRuer's heroes can be inspiring, and some of the participants in my study have likewise taken up a *crip* subject

position. However, they also strive for normalcy. A culturally and historically situated notion of the abject exposes compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory heterosexuality, and helps us better understand the quest of disabled people for social inclusion.

ELISABET APELMO bor i Malmö. Hon är konstnär och doktorand i sociologi vid Lunds universitet, där hon utforskar frågor om kropp, kön, ojämlikhet och skillnad. Hennes avhandling undersöker hur unga kvinnor med fysiska funktionsnedsättningar förhåller sig till sina egna kroppar och till idrott som socialt fält.

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NOTES

1. "Impairment" is used here to refer to physical dysfunctions, whereas "disability" indicates restrictions imposed by society. However, this distinction is not meant to imply a binary division between the biological and the social in which the body is regarded as a purely natural organism or pre-social entity. From a social constructionist perspective, a more complex understanding of impairment and disability is needed. Sociologists Bill Hughes and Kevin Paterson claim that "impairment (as physicality) cannot escape either cultural meanings and beliefs or its embeddedness in social structure. On the other hand, oppression and prejudice not only belong to the political body, but become embodied as pain and 'suffering'" (1997:336). Thus, impairments can be understood as socially interpreted, and social oppression is embodied.
2. My research project has focused on gender, age, and disability. Although the way in which participants' practices and identities may have been determined by their social class is a relevant research question, it was beyond the scope of my investigation. While a class perspective is not always necessary, it would have been valuable (as I show in this article) to include in McRuer's analysis.

SAMMANFATTNING

Denna artikel presenterar en kritisk läsning av litteraturvetaren Robert McRuers *Crip Theory: cultural signs of queerness and disability* (2006), i vilken författaren utforskar gemensamma beröringspunkter mellan funktionshinderforskning och queerteori. Artikelns syfte är tvåfaldigt. Inledningsvis analyseras vilka konsekvenser McRuers val av empiri har för det ramverk han utvecklar: cripteorin. Därefter undersöks cripteorins relevans för en studie om hur unga kvinnor, 15–27 år, med fysiska funktionsnedsättningar i form av rörelsehinder förhåller sig till sina egna kroppar och till idrott som socialt fält.

McRuers förskjutning av fokus från den funktionshindrade kroppen till den obligatoriska funktionsfullkomligheten är löftesrik, även om dess samverkan med den obligatoriska heterosexualiteten inte är helt teoretiskt utvecklad. Som aktivist strävar McRuer efter samhällelig förändring: "an accessible world is possible [...] constructed in opposition to neoliberalism [...] a disabled world is possible and desirable" (2006:71). Tillgänglighet ska här förstås i vid bemärkelse, inte bara som tillgång till fysisk miljö utan också som förändrade attityder och ökad kunskap. Subjektspositionen som funktionshindrad blir åtråvärd genom den icke-individuella cripidentitet som McRuer föreslår – vem som helst kan som en solidarisk, politisk handling inta positionen som crip. Denna nya, förändrade värld kan uppnås dels genom politiskt arbete i koalitioner (McRuer är dock tämligen vag på denna punkt), dels genom olydnad och överskridanden av gränser. McRuer visar hur författare, konstnärer och dokumentärfilmare kritiserar konstruktionen av funktionshindrade kroppar, liksom den nya till synes förbättrade homofobin och ableismen (diskriminering mot människor med funktionsnedsättningar) som riktas mot dessa kroppar. Detta är dock en individualiserad form av förändringsarbete som kräver tillgång till ekonomiskt, kulturellt och socialt kapital och därför inte är tillgänglig för alla.

En risk med den kollektiva cripidentitet som McRuer förespråkar är att den ytterligare kan förstärka användandet av den levda erfarenheten av funktionshinder som en metafor för exempelvis lidande, brist eller övervinnande av

hinder. De faktiska livsvillkoren för människor med funktionsnedsättningar osynliggörs och det blir svårare för dem att framföra krav.

Likt den mediala stereotypen supercrips – som utför fysiska stordåd – kan McRuers cripa hjältar inspirera, och deltagarna i min studie intar stundtals en crip subjektsposition. Men de strävar också efter normalitet. Med ett kulturellt och historiskt situerat abjektionsbegrepp kan kritiken av den obligatoriska funktionsfullkomligheten och heterosexualiteten fördjupas och krav på inkludering från människor med funktionsnedsättningar förstås.