

Crip World-Making

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In March 2020, as the COVID-19 crisis escalated into a global emergency, I left the United States for Bogotá, to see my Colombian partner, who was at the time living there. The initial plan was to stay for ten days (spring break); I returned to the United States almost six months later, on a humanitarian flight. Among my circle of friends and colleagues, we had one of the strictest lockdowns, but the extension of my time in Colombia was in many ways not undesirable, as I was heading into a sabbatical and germinating a project (which I will continue to work on for the next few years) considering crip art, crip theory, and crip culture in Latin America. I write mostly in English but for some time have been very invested in critiquing the centrality of English in disability studies and considering whether or how that centrality short-circuits what I consider here as “crip world-making.” The project I am germinating has put me into contact and conversation (in Spanish and English directly, and Portuguese in translation), over the past decade or more, with disability studies scholars and crip community from Mexico to Chile to Brazil and beyond. At the very least, during the strict lockdown in Colombia, I was able to extend, virtually, those connections.

Gabriel García Márquez, when asked about magical realism, once famously asserted that the mix of the fantastic and the real was not some anomaly, but just how life was in Latin America: “El surrealismo proviene de la realidad de América Latina” (Surrealism comes from the reality of Latin America) (as quoted in Tovar 2018). I’ve sometimes half-joked that *la teoría crip* (crip theory) in Latin America is something of an analogue. It seems to me that crip theory *as an analytic* is particularly useful for getting at what might *also* be called the mix of the fantastic and the real; that is, at the complexity of varied disabilities, impairments, bodies, minds, and behaviors in a range of Latin American locations. Although crip theory certainly does not oppose a positive disability rights and disability studies agenda that emphasizes, say, formal legal reform and substantive, recognizable identities (an agenda that has often developed most in North American locations above the Rio Grande), it is also always particularly interested in that which is in *excess* of an able-bodied/disabled binary (and this is perhaps especially important in locations where there is no exact translation for *able-bodiedness*). A crip analytic thus often works with and against identity simultaneously, affirming complex lived experiences of disability but getting at,

nonetheless, what might exceed the analytic capacity of the signifier *disability*. This is useful for locations where, indeed, disability and impairment are widespread, even affecting at times the majority of people in a particular Latin American location. This certainly seemed to be the case during our 2020 lockdown in Bogotá, as daily COVID-19 cases were always noted with risk factors listed according to various disabilities (diabetes, hypertension, etc.), and as certain neighborhoods were hit particularly hard, even hanging red flags out the windows of apartment buildings to mark both hunger and suffering.

The double-edged move of affirming disability identity and culture *and* getting at what exceeds it marks *crip* as doing, in my mind, somewhat different work from an analytic such as *debility*. *Debility* has also been used by some scholars to describe a more generalized embodied or experiential state in a given location where many people experience chronic illness or impairment of some kind (and where, at times, no exact translation exists in a particular language for *disability*). It has sometimes been put forward as a replacement of sorts, as when Jasbir K. Puar advocates for “a move from disability to debility” (2009, 166). In multiple Latin American locations, however, colleagues and activists have told me over and over how important it is to mark disability, especially in contexts where it has so often been *unremarked* or actively dismissed or degraded (through, for instance, austerity regimes that directly target resources disabled people depend on for survival). Work in debility studies has sometimes been wary of such affirmations of identity, linking them to a limited disability identity politics “that is manifest through state, market, and institutional recognition” and even “overdetermined by ‘white fragility’” (Puar 2017, xiv). This is, however, a neoliberal identity politics that has essentially had its greatest traction in the United States. As Lisa Duggan has suggested, at times some narrow critiques of identity politics “focus on the identities, and overlook politics, which is a way not to take any of it seriously” (2003, 86). Duggan’s historical perspective advocates, instead, for noting carefully how identity politics work in particular times and places. When activists in Latin America are in fact advocating for naming and inhabiting a range of disabled identities, it seems to me important not to reduce their political efforts to neoliberal identity politics. A crip analytic can attend to that affirmation of identity while also attending to the ways in which Latin American crip politics is focused on intersections and coalitions that are in excess of disability identity per se.

A crip analytic also speaks to and about bodies, minds, behaviors, and experiences that get *invisibilized* in various locations and conversations but that should be absolutely central to those conversations. The conference “Crippling Development,” in the Czech Republic in 2013, for example (a follow-up to a similar conference, “Crippling Neoliberalism,” in 2010), focused on how disability should be at the center of critiquing dominant discourses of development; it was a conference also interested, notably, in finding (new) languages adequate for approaching disability and embodiment in postsocialist locations and the Global South.

And since crip perspectives have been widely shared across borders, crip theory is an analytic that seems particularly useful for Latin America, where “activismos *disca* latinoamericanos” (to use a phrase that has begun to circulate widely from Mexico to Colombia to Argentina) are regularly shared and discussed beyond any single national border.

Because it has spread so rapidly, the origins of the use of *disca* itself are unclear. Mexican anthropologist Jhonatthan Maldonado Ramírez tells me that to think with and through *disca* is a way of thinking of “una forma de vida enunciable y vivible” (a form of life that is articulable and livable). It is also a way of thinking intersectionally; both the Mexican activist group Femidiscas and Argentinian activists and journalists in the group Periodismo Femidisca, for example, link their anti-ableist work to a militant feminism focused on a wide range of issues, including sex education and the politics of abortion. Periodismo Femidisca asserts, “Reivindicar la discapacidad como una identidad política, nos otorga un lugar protagónico en la construcción de subjetividades. En esto radica nuestra existencia, en un abordaje transversal y comprometido acerca de los feminismos y la discapacidad” (Claiming disability as a political identity gives us a leading place in the construction of subjectivities. This is where our existence lies, in a cross-cutting and committed approach to feminisms and disability) (Periodismo Femidisca 2020). Regardless of its varied uses across the region, *disca* can provide in its very form a way of thinking about and living with *disability* without centralizing *ability* through the very word, since *disca* cuts short the *capacidad* part of the word *discapacidad* (it can be quite common to shorten words in Spanish, but for some users of *disca*, this is intentional). In Colombia and other locations, autistic activists have proclaimed #SoyDisca (I am Disca) or #OrgulloDisca (Disca pride) on Twitter, the latter partially speaking to the fact that the term has in some places been used pejoratively and is being reclaimed by activists. *Disca* is not exactly gendered (or could be seen as queerly gendered) as the words *discapacitado* and *discapacitada* are. *Disca* arguably, as well, circulates easily alongside *crip*, as in, for example, the virtual 2021 event “Teoría Crip y activismos *disca* latinoamericanos,” which brought together groups from numerous countries, including the queer and Deaf group Colectivo de sordos LGBT de Guatemala, Edukdiversa from Colombia, Aneupi from Ecuador, and a selection of Argentinian activist groups (the event was organized by the Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Argentina).

What’s most important, of course, is not so much any one term (and I’ll discuss a selection of others later), but the cultural work that an analytic performs (again, resignifying pejorative terms, working with and against identity simultaneously, focusing on processes of invisibilization, and so forth). Jhonatthan Maldonado Ramírez, writing about Down syndrome in a Mexican context and drawing on the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, uses crip theory and affect

theory specifically to resist neoliberal modes of interpreting disability that would contain and domesticate it. He writes,

Mi modo de interpretar esto es desde una crip-tica afectiva en la que discapacidad signifique una forma de vida siempre dispuesta a tocarnos, no como la advertencia de una desgracia o la búsqueda de la empatía inclusiva, sino como una experiencia que . . . nos estaría acariciando, conectando, alcanzando y abrazando a través del carácter relacional e interdependiente de nuestra vulnerabilidad.

My way of interpreting this is from a crip-tic affect in which disability signifies a way of life always ready to touch us, not as the warning of a misfortune or the search for inclusive empathy, but as an experience that . . . would be caressing, connecting, reaching out and embracing us through the relational and interdependent nature of our vulnerability. (Maldonado Ramírez 2020; my translation)

Naomi Klein (2007) and others have analyzed at length how neoliberal capitalism was, essentially, test-run in Latin America. The unpopular ideas became more palatable globally in the years of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan after they had been (at times violently) imposed in Chile, Argentina, and other Latin American locations. In the wake of this now deeply sedimented history, what Maldonado Ramírez is reaching for as he imagines *una crip-tica afectiva* are embodied manners of relating (“acariciando, conectando, alcanzando y abrazando”) that negate the utility of disability for neoliberalism. Like many countries, Mexico has celebrated (often for political photo ops) individual disabled people, such as, for instance, Paralympian Gustavo Sánchez Martínez, a disabled swimmer who won two gold medals, one silver, and one bronze at the 2012 London Paralympic Games. Former president Enrique Peña Nieto awarded the Premio Nacional de Deporte (National Award for Sport) to Sánchez Martínez, at a time when Peña Nieto was being protested by radical student movements calling out state violence and control of the media. Sánchez Martínez thus arguably functioned as a smokescreen for the embattled president, who asserted in the ceremony, “Este es el momento de México y vamos a hacerlo realidad. Quiero una nación sana, y fuerte, y ustedes, los deportistas son el mejor ejemplo a seguir” (This is Mexico’s moment and we are going to make it reality. I want a nation healthy and strong and you, the athletes, are the best example to follow) (*Vanguardia* 2012, my translation; also see McRuer 2018, 159–161). Such neoliberal spectacularization is the opposite of what Maldonado Ramírez theorizes as he focuses on interdependence and on the vulnerability that can never be captured by a photo op. Ironically, such vulnerability could include Mexican Paralympians themselves, who have at times struggled to find accessible housing and have been forced to live in crumbling training facilities.

Maldonado Ramírez's and others' analyses should push us to question the hegemony of English in disability studies. The field has at times been faulted for the dominance of North American and European perspectives, but that easy critique should even more be directed, as I suggested at the outset, at the dominance of *English*. Indeed, some of the most exciting work in disability studies and crip theory, even in Europe, is being generated by scholars whose first language is not English and who write in other European languages (often in addition to English). And although (again) not the only keyword, *crip* has often been an important one for these scholars and activists: Melania Moscoso Pérez (2013, 170) has theorized "cripwashing" as a complex process of state control whereby the Spanish state uses the language of disability liberation to cover over neoliberal policies of control; Kateřina Kolářová (2014, 257) has examined a figure she calls "the inarticulate post-socialist crip" to get at perspectives in postsocialist locations that are erased by compulsory capitalist progress narratives (even when those narratives celebrate disability). Anticapitalist activists in Vienna periodically release, in German and English, *Crip Magazine*.

Of course, one could say that there is a danger of cultural imperialism when an English term such as *crip* enters other languages. The generative, world-making possibilities opened up as *crip* travels, however, exceed that danger, especially as it works *in tandem* with a range of other signs in a language such as Spanish. When my own book *Crip Theory* was translated into Spanish in 2021, I had a series of conversations not only with the translator (Javier Sáez de Álamo, based in Spain) but with colleagues and activists from Canada to Argentina and virtually every Spanish-speaking location in between. The conversations highlighted inventiveness and play with languages for disability in any and all Spanish-speaking locations. *Teoría tullida*, one of the first possibilities for a translation, has had some circulation as an alternative to *teoría crip*, but almost entirely in Spain itself (where in fact *tullido/a* can be adequately translated as "crip" or "cripple"). As with many Spanish concepts, however, *tullido/a* is used in a very different way in some locations. Although it's more common in Medellín than Bogotá, for example, in Colombia *tullido* is more common for talking about being cold, as in the expression *tullido del frío*. *Teoría coja* was another possibility (with *cojo* or *coja* roughly translating as "lame"). At least one colleague, from a Cuban perspective, was very much in favor of using *teoría coja*. He cited the Cuban double bassist Cachao López's performance of "Juana la coja" as evidence of the term's cultural generativity. The song is about a woman who has a wooden leg with termites in it; it plays with the Cuban tendency to use the term *coja/o* to refer to anyone in the neighborhood who walked in a way perceived to be "funny." The English translators of the Cuban song called it "Jane the Lame." In the end, however, *teoría coja* too seemed to other colleagues in different locations to be at least somewhat regionally specific. *Lisiada* as a term does have wide circulation, mainly because of a famous scene from a 1990s Mexican soap

opera. A mother in the series enters a room where her daughter (who uses a wheelchair) is kissing an able-bodied boy: “Maldita lisiada!” (roughly, “wicked cripple” or “damn cripple”), the mother screams, and she continues to berate and hit her daughter and the boy, in a scene that has been shared millions of times on YouTube. *Lisiada*, too, has been reclaimed and resignified, as in Argentinian activist and poet Daiana Travesani’s beautiful poem and performance “Lisiada”:

Me odié por largo rato,
me negué infinidad de veces por ser disca ahora.

En ese proceso de deconstrucción el odio calmó y clamó.

He cambiado, mutado y transmutado,
fui real e irreal.

Mi piel a veces porosa y otras tantas una seda,
a diferencia de mi lengua guerrillera.

(I hated myself for a long time,
I negated countless times that I am *disca* now.

In this deconstruction process, hatred calmed and cried out.

I have changed, mutated and transmuted,
I was real and unreal.

My skin is sometimes porous and sometimes a silk,
unlike my militant language.) (Travesani 2020; my translation)

What struck me most about this extended conversation across the Americas, however, was how *crip*, *cojo*, *disca*, *lisiada*, and other terms were already in circulation and were functioning in a kind of world-making way, often repeating and reversing the negative, pejorative, or degrading terms by which disabled people have been kept in their place and imagining (and materializing) an elsewhere and elsewhere, “crip futures” and “crip horizons” as Kolářová describes them (2014, 259, 265). Queer world-making was first theorized by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1998, 556); it has since been widely used to describe queer practices that are “creative, performative, intimate, public, disruptive, utopian, and more” (I draw this from the description used by the editors of the journal *QED: A Journal in LGBTQ Worldmaking* in their invitation for contributions) (*QED* 2013). *Crip* world-making, which activists, artists, and scholars are in the process of imagining and inventing, is arguably more concrete, at times focusing

on the *literal* reshaping of spaces, always with an aim toward imagining more bodies, minds, and behaviors in those spaces. Aimi Hamraie's concept of "alter-livability" helps me to concretize crip world-making. Alterlivability is, Hamraie, writes, citing Anna Tsing, "a 'material-discursive' phenomenon" that "conjures visions of livability in spite of . . . 'capitalist ruins'" and encourages expanding "notions of lives worth living," pushing us "to theorize how livable worlds materialize" (Hamraie 2020, 407). "Lives worth living" (it should really go without saying) can and should be enunciated in any and all languages. The vibrancy of conversations across Spanish and (of course) other languages compels us to continually mark the fact that alter-livability and crip world-making *cannot exist* if they are not constantly critiquing the hegemony of English and pushing toward the multilingual.

García Márquez also famously said, "No tenemos otro mundo al que poder-nos mudar" (We don't have another world that we can move to) (as quoted in Andina 2013). We in fact live in a fantastic and real world of what crip activist and theorist Eli Clare calls "brilliant imperfection": "a way of knowing, understanding, and living with disability and chronic illness . . . rooted in the nonnegotiable value of body-mind difference" (2017, xvii). *Nonnegotiable value* is such a beautiful concept, a generatively *twisted* concept in the world of neoliberal capitalism that we inhabit (it is also, arguably, an ethic for valuing "body-mind difference" that permeates all of Clare's writing). *Nuestras lenguas guerrilleras*, to return to Travesani, *lenguas guerrilleras* in which crip worlds materialize, also have nonnegotiable value, and it should not only be those whose second language is English who apprehend that value. We don't have another world to move to, *pero otro mundo es posible* (but another world is possible), as counter-globalization activists have long insisted. Welcoming those crip ways of knowing differently, or at least discerning that crip horizon, requires patience, sharing across borders, and a deep appreciation for the worlds that translation across all our differences affords us.

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