

Comment from the Field

Crippling Development Conference, National Academy of Sciences, Prague

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In September 2013, scholars and activists gathered at the National Academy of Sciences in Prague's Old City to think through what a decolonized queercrip disability studies might mean. The conference organizers wrote that they hoped "to provide space for critical dialogue between disability studies and studies of Central and Eastern Europe, postcolonial studies, global and development studies."

Over three days, the conference unfolded as a unified seminar, allowing those in attendance to interact in an intimate environment. Proceedings included discussions and keynote addresses by invited speakers, a video presentation of a contemporary art performance piece, a presentation of a live artwork, two workshops, five panels of paper presentations, and a crip dance party. At any given point, the audience in the seminar space ranged from 15 to 40 people.

Interdisciplinarity and scholar-activist interplay were central to the goals of the conference, organized by the Gender Research Office of the University of Vienna and the Department of Gender Studies of Charles University in Prague. Contributors included scholars from cultural studies, gender studies, history, sociology, cultural and applied anthropology, as well as activists who do not locate themselves in the academy. A common goal of destabilizing Western academic (especially masculinist, heteronormative, white, mainstream development) voices in transnational problems of disability emerged as a key topic for discussion in both formal proceedings and informal conversations.

Accessibility remained a concern, despite the best efforts of the organizers. Conference conveners sought out physically accessible venues, planned for meals and coffee breaks catering to a range of dietary needs, provided gender-neutral toilets in the main conference space, designated a quiet space, arranged for simultaneous transcription, and requested that presenters provide presentation scripts. But organizers were frustrated to find that lodgings, billed as accessible, turned out not to be for at least one international guest. Linguistic

barriers remained. Some presenters spoke quickly in hard-to-translate English, or did not stick to the scripts they had provided the transcriptionists. This made it difficult for some non-native English speakers to follow presentations and participate in discussion, revealing that accessibility is an important intersection of disability and the postcolonial linguistic order (which continues to elevate English as the language of international exchange).

The conference kicked off with an event at the Czech National Theater. *Haute Coutures 01 Fires* by Ines Doujak, a performance piece, was regrettably presented in video format instead of live, due to a performer's last-minute illness. *Haute Coutures 01 Fires* centers on the narratives of two women who do not know one another, indeed, who could not have known one another across space and time. But in the performance the two women are doubly twins. Metaphorically, they are twins in that they both died in fires in textile workshops. Physically, they are represented in the performance as conjoined: two female performers don a single pair of enormous blue jeans, one in each leg, symbolically merging their narratives and bodies.

Conference co-organizer Kateřina Kolářová introduced the piece, and reminded viewers that the medium of performance is uniquely poised to operate in this interstice of decolonial disability. The scholarly bias for the written word not only limits the kinds of ideas to which scholars have access, but also limits who can participate in critical conversation; performance opens possibilities for affinities, connections, and critiques that may be missed in text-based formats.

Following the screening, respondents Anastasia Kayiatos and Robert McRuer presented remarks, which, although prepared separately, shared important overlaps. American disability studies (of which we might consider both of these scholars provident) has rarely dealt with questions of how global supply chains are complicit in the creation of disability and debility. Doujak's artwork raised questions about spatially diffuse production/consumption, bodies in labor, and bodies in pain. McRuer and Kayiatos suggested that the Global North is always complicit in othering by imagining the Global South as backwards/crippled/undeveloped, and complicit in material relations that inflict bodily impairment on colonized bodies. Suspended in relations of capital, specifically neoliberalism, there is always greater potential labor value to be extracted from a given body. The "neoliberal chronotype," the panelists suggested, is perversely synchronous (supply chain dynamics aside) in both the North and South, as human experience is squeezed through a wringer of productivity.

How does the language of disability and accommodation contribute to systems of domination in the Global South? Kayiatos observed that, in

neoliberal chronicity, as in colonial otherness, bodies meld together, and individuality fades. McRuer concurred, but pointed out that privilege allows certain individuals to escape this compression of subjectivity; when the white male capitalist speaks in *Haute Coutures 01*, disability and debility become not only continuous realities affecting masses of undifferentiated—or even conjoined—brown and female bodies, but is simultaneously deployed selectively as a signal to respect and defer to some powerful personas that must be accommodated.

The following morning, conference co-organizer Maria Katharina Wiedlack opened proceedings with a set of remarks highlighting the importance of critiquing a normative model of development, which has been used to pathologize certain human bodies and geopolitical entities. Drawing on Raymond Williams, Wiedlack pointed out that “after 1945 the new concept of ‘underdeveloped’ was attached to lands where natural resources have been insufficiently developed (read: exploited), and that societies are destined to pass through stages of development according to a known model.” Wiedlack stressed the relationship between development and exploitation on both global and interpersonal scales.

Helen Meekosha (Australia) delivered Opening Remarks remotely via video conference. She urged scholars in disability studies/postcolonial studies to question the process of knowledge production. Disability studies, she asserted, needs to theorize relationships created through (neo)colonialism and to recognize the ongoing violence against colonized people in settler societies. One path forward, she suggested, is to seek out indigenous knowledges about disability. But integrating indigenous knowledge into scholarship is fraught, given the historical power dynamics of research “on” or “about” colonized peoples. Meekosha recalled an interlocutor in an aboriginal community who likened researchers to “pelicans that fly into our communities once a year, gather up our knowledge, fly out full, and return the next year empty.” Disability studies, Meekosha urged, must beware of a scholarly colonialism in which the researcher gathers up data, returns to the academy, and devises a development plan to be enacted on the studied population, without collaboration or meaningful local outcomes.

A later panel on indigeneity and disability reopened this thread. Karin Soldatic (Australia, via video conference) reminded the audience that “the ‘post-’ in postcolonial is misplaced; from the perspective of many indigenous peoples, colonization has not ended.” Scholars must actively engage an ongoing process of decolonization both in their own assumptions and in the frameworks reproduced in their work. Soldatic observed that disability status, as a category

of the welfare state, can be a dangerous identifier for members of indigenous groups to claim, for two reasons. First, indigenous disability claims may reinforce colonial paradigms of biological inferiority; and second, to claim disability status is to participate in, and thus consent to the legitimacy of, the nation-state. On the same panel Chris Chapman (Canada), offered an extended meditation on the emotional rupture that occurs for the scholar reckoning with her own complicity in colonization. Filip Herza (Czech Republic) theorized the relationship between geographic periphery and freakery.

Invited speaker Mel Y. Chen (USA) presented a keynote address for the second day of the conference, sharing a slow and building consideration of the ways in which developmental delays have been used as an idiom through which American whiteness paints Asian Americans as others. Chen drew on eclectic cultural examples from the web series *Orange Is the New Black*, to news-anchor plastic surgery, to historical texts in order to investigate the ways in which discourses of disability and racial difference have been deployed in tandem to reinforce white privilege as legitimate and justified in dismissing Asian American subjectivity as backwards and “sleepy.” Anastasia Kayiatos (USA) presented a paper with similar themes. She observed that in American media representations “the Russian orphan” is imagined as an institutionalized child, always developmentally delayed, emotionally deprived, victimized, and disempowered—a characterization that, she argued, is intrinsically linked to a (post-)Cold War American imagination of the Russian national character as similarly delayed, deprived, and disempowered.

In the final keynote address on the third day of the conference, Darja Zaviršek (Slovenia) argued that configurations of gender, neoliberal reforms, and social services in postsocialism act as justification for the ongoing subjugation of women with disabilities in Eastern Europe. Drawing on research with women with disabilities, Zaviršek argued that while EU development goals purport to address disability rights, disability inclusion frameworks fail to address problems that are common across postsocialist spaces. Zaviršek’s research reveals that many women with disabilities in postsocialist Eastern Europe are facing a near constant threat of violence because they are isolated in family homes, relying on caretakers who are family members, and, often use neglect and physical force to manipulate and bully. Thus isolated, these women are precluded from the kind of solidarity building that leads to legitimate complaint, and as dependent non-laborers their personhood is compromised. This violence, Zaviršek argues, continues partially because development discourses and neoliberalism personalize violence, rather than conceptualizing

the marginalization and subjugation of women with disabilities as part of larger social systems.

Carework, Petra Ezzedine (Czech Republic) argued in another paper, is also embedded in systems of neoliberal labor. Based on interviews with female migrant laborers in the Czech Republic, frequently from Ukraine, Ezzedine tracked the ways in which carework is feminized and racialized. Louise Hickman (UK) presented a paper that addressed carework as perpetually in tension between neoliberal state time and crip time. She offered the pungent example of activists using colostomy bags as projectile missiles in a political protest as an example of a crip intervention; crip practice, she argued, creates ruptures in neoliberal regimes of the body, from temporality to self-care to norms of discretion and respectability.

Susan Schweik (USA) presented a moving paper (via video conference) titled “Decolonizing Exposure: On the Case of Agent Orange.” Schweik’s late husband died from cancers related to exposure to chemical weapons during his time as a soldier; he had subsequently been a dedicated activist against chemical weapons. Schweik herself now works with the activist group The Yelling Clinic. In 2011 the collective visited a hospital in Ho Chi Minh City where children affected by chemical aftermath are interred and cared for. Upon returning home, the collective was surprised to find that photos of the very same children were widespread in online tourist accounts of visits to the city. How would it be possible to create a record of disability and the aftermath of warfare that did not reproduce colonialist imaginings of poster-child-victims? Schweik described a response from Yelling clinic artist Sunaura Taylor, who painted interpretations of photos that those children had taken of *her*; by choosing this process, Taylor complicated the directionality of the gaze, of who ought to be stared at, by whom, and for what reason. Additionally, the collective formed a relationship with local disabled outsider artists, whose raw, lifelike paintings of people with non-normative embodiments shared affinity with a Western crip aesthetic of resistance and pride.

Robert McRuer (USA) considered dispossession (of the many by the few) in conditions of neoliberalism as preceded by and resulting in crip configurations. Locating his analysis in Mexico City, he focused on two case studies: families displaced when their neighborhood was redeveloped (documented in photographs by Livia Radwanska); and an initiative by the British Embassy to install curb cuts (but only in the region around the embassy, and even as neoliberal reforms back home in Britain reduced disability benefits). McRuer’s presentation offered an interpretation of neoliberal dispossession as always

entangled in (creating and created by) debility and disability; nation-states simultaneously parade symbolic “access” and dispossess actual bodies.

My own experience of the conference was highly charged, particularly as an American writing about Eastern European/Russian disability experience. I was nervous, as a junior scholar, to be slated with the final presentation slot. Drawing on ethnographic research in Russia, I questioned the translatability of the theoretical concept *crip* into the Russian context, given that the Western notion of *crip* relies on affinities with gender, LGBTQ, and race-based civil rights histories—a linguistic concept of citizenship and “rights” that Russian speakers do not share. I was challenged by audience members to present this material in a manner that does not fall into the trap of essentializing Russian minority experience.

A closing exchange underlined the divide in communication style and goals between non-scholar activists and those who locate themselves in academia (even while many consider themselves to bridge those two identities). As the evening turned from presentations and responses to casual conversations and a crip dance, I found myself coming back again and again to one thought: there is a commonality at play in racism, sexism, heterosexism, cisgenderism, colonialism, and ableism—the insistence that certain biologies ought to beget particular social fates.