

# QUEERING THE CRIP OR CRIPPING THE QUEER?

## Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance

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As the interdisciplinary field of disability studies develops its own theoretical paradigms, it necessarily borrows from various sources. Such borrowing means that disability scholars have not had to reinvent the wheel but have been able to build on the conceptual foundations of identity-based theories that have grown out of other interdisciplinary fields, such as gender studies and critical race studies. But disability studies offers as much to its predecessors as it borrows from them. This essay explores the productive reciprocity between queer theory and disability studies, queer identity and crip identity, queer activism and crip activism.<sup>1</sup>

Those who claim both identities may be best positioned to illuminate their connections, to pinpoint where queerness and “cripdom” intersect, separate, and coincide. Crip, queer, solo autobiographical performance artists, who explicitly identify themselves as both crip and queer in their work, provide us not only with a verbal articulation of these issues but with an embodied text. The theater scholar Jill Dolan notes that live performance offers a forum for “embodying and enacting new communities of performers and spectators, by actualizing the potential of well-meaning political buttons that two-dimensionally purport to ‘celebrate diversity.’” She reminds us that the theater is a “place to experiment with the production of cultural meanings, on bodies willing to try a range of different significations for spectators willing to read them.”<sup>2</sup> The four solo performances that I discuss in this essay—Greg Walloch’s *White Disabled Talent*, Robert DeFelice’s *Crippled, Queer, and Legally Blond(e)*, Julia Trahan’s *Nickels from Heaven*, and Terry Galloway’s *Out All Night and Lost My Shoes*—experiment with the cultural meanings of *crip* and *queer* in theory, practice, and representation;

these performances are therefore ideal sites at which to tease out the tensions and affinities between the two.<sup>3</sup>

As academic corollaries of minority civil rights movements, queer theory and disability studies both have origins in and ongoing commitments to activism. Their primary constituencies, sexual minorities and people with disabilities, share a history of injustice: both have been pathologized by medicine; demonized by religion; discriminated against in housing, employment, and education; stereotyped in representation; victimized by hate groups; and isolated socially, often in their families of origin. Both constituencies are diverse in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, political affiliation, and other respects and therefore share many members (e.g., those who are disabled *and* gay), as well as allies. Both have self-consciously created their own enclaves and vibrant subcultural practices.

Perhaps the most significant similarity between these disciplines, however, is their radical stance toward concepts of normalcy; both argue adamantly against the compulsion to observe norms of all kinds (corporeal, mental, sexual, social, cultural, subcultural, etc.). This stance may even be considered their *raison d'être*, since both emerged from critiques levied against the normalizing tendencies of their antecedents.<sup>4</sup> Queer theorists critiqued feminist, gay and lesbian, and even gender studies for excluding various sexual constituents (transsexuals, bisexuals, transgendered people, S/M practitioners, nonheteronormative straights, etc.) and for advocating inclusion and representation in, rather than replacement of, existing social structures. Disability scholars critiqued the fact that disability had long been relegated to academic disciplines (primarily medicine, social sciences, and social services) that considered disabilities “problems” to be cured and the disabled “defectives” to be normalized, not a minority group with its own politics, culture, and history.

Because of these similarities, it may seem that disability studies has little to add to queer theory, and vice versa; indeed, some may assume that disability studies is a subset of queer theory. Consider, for example, how the term *queer* has been defined by some of its proponents. In *The Queer Renaissance* Robert McRuer describes *queer* as a fluid designation for identities that “are shaped and reshaped across differences and that interrogate and disrupt dominant hierarchical understandings of not only sex, gender, and sexuality but also race and class.”<sup>5</sup> I think that McRuer would agree to adding disability to that list. Michael Warner, in *Fear of a Queer Planet*, argues for an even broader definition: “The preference for ‘queer’ represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation

in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal.”<sup>6</sup> Disability studies’ stance against “regimes of the normal” may appear to be more of the same; as Judith Butler argues in *Bodies That Matter*, the term *queer*, rather than describing a specific identity, can be considered “a site of collective contestation . . . the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings.” Thus it must “remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes.”<sup>7</sup> Because disability civil rights could be considered just such an urgent political purpose, one might assume that *queer* could be redeployed in its service. Moreover, the term *cripple*, like *queer*, is fluid and ever-changing, claimed by those whom it did not originally define. As a pejorative, the term *queer* was originally targeted at gays and lesbians, yet its rearticulation as a term of pride is currently claimed by those who may not consider themselves homosexual, such as the transgendered, transsexuals, heterosexual sex radicals, and others. The term *crip* has expanded to include not only those with physical impairments but those with sensory or mental impairments as well. Though I have never heard a nondisabled person seriously claim to *be crip* (as heterosexuals have claimed to *be queer*), I would not be surprised by this practice. The fluidity of both terms makes it likely that their boundaries will dissolve.

I am not suggesting that queer theorists would contest disability studies as a field in its own right, but I do think that a thorough analysis of the fields’ points of intersection and departure is necessary. My project of extricating disability studies from queer theory echoes the work of other scholars who have criticized queer theory’s tendency to absorb and flatten internal differences, in particular to neutralize its constituents’ material and cultural differences and to elevate the concerns of gay white men above all others. The theater scholar Susan McCully contends that queer theory, in radically deconstructing the “normal,” has inadvertently led to an ambiguous ideology devoid of an activist base.<sup>8</sup> Warner, who argues for the potential strategic expansiveness of the term *queer*, would seem to offer a corrective by reminding his readers that queer theory’s vitality depends on its willingness to recognize difference: “Theory has to understand that different identity environments are neither parallel—so that the tactics and values of one might be assumed to be appropriate for another—nor separable. Queer struggles and those of other identity movements, or alternatively of other new social movements, often differ in important ways—even when they are intermingled in experience.”<sup>9</sup> The crip, queer, solo autobiographical performers I analyze in this essay sort through that intermingled experience onstage and off, in performance and in interviews.<sup>10</sup> Their work suggests that the clash between crip and queer identities

exposes sites for activism and clarifies significant issues for both groups. In fact, the relationship between them can be considered a system of checks and balances, essential for keeping queer theory or activism and disability studies or activism from becoming ideologically ambivalent.<sup>11</sup>

I begin by discussing the centrality of solo autobiographical performance to queer and crip subcultures, as well as some important differences between them. I then focus on five key sites that Walloch's, DeFelice's, Trahan's, and Galloway's performances foreground: the claiming of crip and queer identities, the practice of queering and what I call "cripping," the act of coming out as a crip queer, the public display of sexualized bodily difference, and the process of bearing witness to past and present injustice. Each site suggests potentials for theoretical and activist intervention on the stage, in the academy, and in everyday life.

### Solo Autobiographical Performance



The past twenty-plus years have witnessed a surge in solo autobiographical performance, a hybrid form with elements of stand-up comedy, poetry reading, and one-person drama. These performances take place in art galleries, comedy clubs, theaters, and other public venues, as well as on television. Well-known solo autobiographical artists include such mainstream figures as Whoopi Goldberg, John Leguizamo, Spalding Gray, and Eric Bogosian, as well as performers who play mainly to "performance art" audiences, such as Holly Hughes, Tim Miller, and Karen Finley (though these three artists did gain notoriety in the early 1990s when the National Endowment for the Arts review panel's unanimous recommendations for grants was overturned by the National Council for the Arts).

Typically, the performer tells stories from his or her life on a bare stage or playing area in front of a live audience. The stories, often recounted episodically, may be connected thematically or chronologically or told randomly, and the performer narrates or enacts them in the first-person past or present tense, often interacting with the audience. Usually, performers portray themselves, but sometimes they adopt the personas of other people from their lives. The stories are often jarringly juxtaposed: a comic episode follows a tragic one; a parodic episode, a sincere personal revelation; a spiritual episode, a bad joke. The result is a collage, assembled with liberal poetic license.<sup>12</sup>

What I call solo autobiographical performance, the theater scholar Michael Peterson would classify as a subgenre of the "performance art monologue." Peterson explains that performance art monologues, like other manifestations of performance art, tend to "privilege 'reality' over 'fictionality,' or at least to toy with those

terms,” in that the “author is present onstage in the body of the performer.”<sup>13</sup> This tendency lends performance art monologues the air of authenticity, and thus audiences, critics, and marketers often consider solo artists authentic representatives of the social groups to which they belong (34). The performers, who tend to be charismatic, are considered “heroic geniuses” for exposing the details of their lives to total strangers. Peterson describes how the “monologic apparatus,” or the staging practices of the performance art monologue, augments the performer’s status. The deceptively simple set highlights the performer’s courage in taking the stage alone (5). All of these elements imbue the solo performer with tremendous power. Peterson’s study centers on how the “straight white male” (who is presumably nondisabled) has used this power to buttress heteronormative white identity, whose hegemony has been destabilized in the postmodern age. While Peterson acknowledges the work of many solo performance artists who are not straight, white, and male, his focus precludes an extended analysis of how marginalized groups make use of the monologic apparatus to challenge instead of buttress hegemonic norms.

In their introduction to *O Solo Homo*, however, Hughes and the theater scholar David Román do delineate how queer artists use monologues for this purpose and, in the process, for building alternative communities.<sup>14</sup> In particular, they explore the material and ideological reasons that queer artists are attracted to solo performance. The first is obvious: solo work is cheap and quick to produce. Traditional theatrical production is too expensive for many and too time-consuming to be an effective way to spread a message fast. Second, solo performance is about crossing boundaries. It is open to anyone, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality, who chooses to cast himself or herself as a solo performer; the whims and prejudices of casting directors play no part. Third, it takes seriously the adage that the personal is political. Hughes and Román place this genre in the American tradition of “witnessing,” a project of revising history, educating others about one’s personal experience, and mobilizing them to political or social action. Such a project is vital to those whose stories have been left out of mainstream accounts of history. Fourth, queer performers assert a visible presence through solo work. Finally, solo artists not only define their own identities through autobiographical performance but define and critique their communities. The genre challenges audiences to rethink their assumptions about who is on the inside and who is on the outside of a given community. Queer performers of color, performers who practice radical sex, and transgendered performers have all critiqued gay and lesbian communities’ supposed inclusivity. Queers have also used solo performance to galvanize their communities around specific social issues,

such as AIDS policies and hate crime. I would venture to say that these reasons hold for crip performers just as they do for queer.

Because queer and crip communities share constituents, it is hardly surprising that some queer performance artists are also disabled or that the material and ideological particularities of being disabled nuance those associated with solo performance.<sup>15</sup> For many disabled artists, however, the economic constraints are even more debilitating than they are for nondisabled artists. Some disabled performers live on fixed incomes and are physically unable to live the itinerant life of the “starving artist.” In fact, some are prohibited from making even a small amount of money from their work by the eligibility requirements of the government programs on which they depend. These artists may perform informally at activist or community gatherings rather than give up on the life of a performer altogether.

While performers from both groups are denied opportunities to portray fully rounded, nonstereotypical disabled or gay characters on the mainstream stage, disabled actors may not have physical access to the stage, and disabled audience members may not have access to the house. These actors often turn to solo work to perform themselves or important stories about themselves in alternative, physically accessible spaces. For queer performers, visibility often means proclaiming an otherwise invisible sexuality onstage; the task is different for disabled performers, whose visible impairments often lead to social invisibility.<sup>16</sup> Here I mean *social invisibility* both metaphorically (as in nondisabled people’s lack of regard for disabled people) and literally (as in disabled people’s lack of access to public spaces). Social invisibility extends to academic theater training programs, most of which base admission on a young person’s “talent,” by which they mean the ability to enact a set of virtuosic physical and verbal skills. Many programs are dubious of disabled people’s talent or simply do not recognize it. For example, acting professors may assume that the accent of a person with cerebral palsy precludes his or her success in a voice class. Because many disabled performers are denied admission to training programs, they pursue on-the-job training in solo work. Once onstage, they can address aspects of their identity that mainstream society actively ignores, such as crip sexuality. Additionally, solo performance played an important role in articulating for the disability community and the culture at large the paradigm shift of disability from individual medical tragedy to minority activist identity.<sup>17</sup> In the United States this shift was a necessary precursor to the passage of civil rights legislation, which granted minority status and protections to disabled people in hiring, education, and public access.<sup>18</sup> Both queer and crip solo performances, then, are self-conscious attempts to promote cultural identities as well as political agendas.

The four solo performers whom I discuss in this essay have made use of the solo genre in different ways. Walloch, a Gen-Xer with cerebral palsy, tends to critique crip and queer insider politics as well as outsider cultural perceptions. His work pokes fun at both disability and gay and lesbian communities and disparages any inclination to defer to political correctness. He has attracted much attention because of two documentary films that feature scenes from his solo autobiographical performance: *Keeping It Real: The Adventures of Greg Walloch*, directed by Eli Kabillio, and *Crip Shots*, directed by John R. Killacky and Larry Connolly (both 2001). Walloch's résumé includes credits covering film, television, art festivals, comedy clubs, and theaters. *White Disabled Talent*, his live solo show (fig. 1), has toured extensively internationally and has played at Joe's Pub in the Public Theatre in New York City and at the Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center on the same bill as Lily Tomlin and Jane Wagner's *Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*. Walloch describes the piece as "just another story about your average white, gay, disabled actor struggling to make a buck."<sup>19</sup> Walloch's uncompromising attitude and his willingness to perform in any venue (including a King Size Laundromat in Chelsea and the *Howard Stern Show*) have contributed to his rising popularity not only in the crip and queer communities but in the art world and popular culture.

I saw a production of *White Disabled Talent* at Worcester State College in Massachusetts in 1999. Walloch and I were brought to campus by McCully, an assistant professor of theater at Worcester at the time and the production's organizer. (I was there to present a lecture on media representations of disability.) Walloch typically performs before activist or art-house audiences, but here his audience comprised mainly nursing, occupational therapy, and theater students, whose departments had funded the production. His in-your-face attitude showed them that he was anything but a compliant, passive "patient." The future health professionals seemed uneasy, the theater students stunned into silence. After the show Walloch told me that he was not perturbed by the audience's reaction; in fact, he delighted in offending young preprofessionals and fresh-faced theater students. He is less delighted by audiences he finds patronizing: "Once . . . I performed at this very P.C. and stuffy, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning and Open Orientation conference. The audience was falling all over themselves laughing extra hard, clapping their asses off at the end and coming up to me saying things like 'The community thanks you for just being you.' I got so sad, these are supposed to be my peers, the place I fit in?"<sup>20</sup> Even in the disability community, the response to Walloch's work has been mixed. "A lot of [disabled] people have responded very favorably," he says, "but because my work takes a somewhat ironic tone, some other disabled folks haven't enjoyed it as much."<sup>21</sup>



Figure 1. Greg Walloch performing scenes from *White Disabled Talent* in a stand-up venue. Courtesy Cultural Media Icons

While Walloch is pursuing a career as a professional performer in New York City, DeFelice, who is in his forties and, like Walloch, has cerebral palsy, wrote and performed *Crippled, Queer, and Legally Blond(e)* as a renegade academic presentation. A professor of English and philosophy at Monroe Community College in Rochester, New York, DeFelice claims that he had never seen himself as a performer, “although a teacher is always an actor. And a visibly disabled person . . . is always being stared at by an audience.”<sup>22</sup> The impetus for the piece, which DeFelice describes as “spandex for spastics, Miss Clairol with tremors,” was a philosophy meeting, the “Conference of Persons,” in South Bend, Indiana, in the early 1990s. He told me that, instead of presenting an academic paper, he wanted to “make people question their understanding of ‘personhood’ by pushing their buttons around disability/gender issues [and] making them laugh.” During the mid-1990s he performed the piece a half dozen times in various academic settings; I saw it at a small coffeehouse in 1995 as part of “This/Ability: An Interdisciplinary Conference of Disability and the Arts,” held at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor.<sup>23</sup> The appreciative audience included both queer and straight crip artists and academics, as well as allies and personal care attendants.

Some of DeFelice’s performances were for college classes “where able-bodied students were studying to work with disabled people (for example, in social work).” Their responses varied:

Young able-bodied college students often seem surprised to discover that disabled people are sexual beings, let alone that we can flaunt our sexuality. Able-bodied “professionals” play cool. They know disabled people can have sex. They read it in their graduate school textbook. Initially, for both able-bodied groups, their laughter is uncomfortable, as though I wasn’t expecting or wanting it. . . . Crip audiences laugh. Some crip audiences focus on the nerve it takes to bare one’s body and soul. Their laughter is a release, a high for them and for me.

Though DeFelice has given up performance for the time being, he claims that the experience of doing the show changed him: “Under the Land’s End blazer and trousers, you just might find a red spandex leotard and a body yearning for yoga.”

I saw Trahan’s performance piece, *Nickels from Heaven*, in 1995 at the same venue where I saw DeFelice’s. Trahan, who is in her thirties and has used the names Dolphin and Michael Michelangelo, is a multimedia performance artist, writer, and activist who has lived and performed in Ohio, California, Hawaii, and Australia.<sup>24</sup> Trahan’s work consciously challenges the communities with which she

is involved, partly because her experiences as an artist vary so much from group to group: "In my predominantly straight disabled activist culture I am welcomed and nurtured as a beautiful, gutsy, pioneering, nationally known writer/performer/videographer. In my non-disabled, sex-radical, pleasure-activist queer culture I barely escape the Patient role. I am an accepted, at times inspirational, but often faceless Weird Disabled Artist."<sup>25</sup> Trahan's solo work can be described as performance collage, which layers storytelling with poetry, movement, and imagery (sometimes provided by electronic media and sometimes by her own elaborately costumed body). Several of her performances describe her growing up disabled as a result of injuries she sustained in a car accident at age eleven, the sexual abuse she suffered as a child, and the connections between feminism, racism, and disability. Like Walloch and DeFelice, Trahan uses humor extensively in her work, but her humor is more raw than clever, more painful than funny. Almost all of her work addresses radical crip-queer sexuality, which earned her renown as San Francisco's own "Post-Modern Daddy Number Two" (fig. 2).<sup>26</sup>

Galloway is a deaf theater artist and writer in her early fifties. Because she reads lips instead of signing, she considers herself an ally rather than a member of Deaf culture; she identifies more readily with crip, queer, and artist communities. Galloway divides her time between two grassroots theaters that she cofounded. In Tallahassee, Florida, she works with the political sketch comedy troupe Mickee Faust Club, which describes itself as an "alternative theatre for alternative communities," and in Austin, Texas, she works with a company of straight and queer disabled people and their allies called Actual Lives, which performs original pieces developed out of members' autobiographical material. Galloway's plays, one-woman shows, and video projects have toured internationally and have played at such U.S. venues as P.S. 122, the Women's Project, and the American Place Theater, all in New York City. She claims that when the University of Texas at Austin rejected her from its undergraduate acting program (offering her instead a place in costume design), she decided to seek performance training any place she could: "After that stinging rebuke, I made up my mind to do any and every kind of theater I could, and do it with a vengeance. Shakespeare, cabaret, solo performance, stand-up, performance poetry, performance art. Video, radio, television, film."<sup>27</sup> This background is apparent in her one-woman show *Out All Night and Lost My Shoes*, a collage of character sketches (both male and female), poetry, jokes, and autobiographical stories about her deafness, queerness, and bouts with mental illness. "The Etiquette of Suicide," one of these sketches, appears in *Crip Shots* (fig. 3). I saw a 1999 production of *Out All Night* at the Canal Club in Tallahassee, Mickee Faust's "clubhouse." The audience consisted of Mickee Faust regulars, including



Figure 2. Julia Trahan, San Francisco's own "Post-Modern Daddy," from *Oranges Aren't Just for Breakfast Anymore*, September 2001. Courtesy Ira Raja

university students and faculty, the alternative arts community, a few radical crip-ples, and quite a few queers. Though Tallahassee's radical crip community is relatively small, Mickee Faust has always incorporated people with disabilities into its company and welcomed them in its audiences. Thus those who frequent Mickee Faust productions are acclimated to crip humor, issues, and aesthetics.

### **Nouns: Queers and Crips**

Walloch, DeFelice, Trahan, and Galloway share the position of being not only outside mainstream culture but outside their own subcultures. As crips, they may



Figure 3. Terry Galloway performing "The Etiquette of Suicide," from *Out All Night and Lost My Shoes*. Courtesy Beatrice Queral Photographique

experience the queer community's ableism; as queers, they may experience the disability community's homophobia. These exclusions are not limited to the differences between crips and queers; they include differences between people *within* each group. As outsiders, queers and crips refuse to minimize their differences by passing as either straight or able-bodied. Instead, they appropriate and rearticulate labels that the mainstream once used to silence or humiliate them and that the liberal factions of their subcultures would like to suppress. Butler, discussing how "those who are abjected come to make their claim through and against the discourses that have sought their repudiation," argues that the very power of the term *queer* to injure has enabled its reworking as a term of empowerment.<sup>28</sup> The same is true of the term *cripple*. As the poet and essayist Eli Clare puts it in *Exile and Pride*, "*Queer* and *Cripple* are cousins: words to shock, words to infuse with pride and self-love, words to resist internalized hatred, words to help forge a politics."<sup>29</sup>

Sometimes these terms are wielded as defiant retorts; Clare contends, for instance, that "to stare down the bully calling cripple, the basher swinging the word queer like a baseball bat, to say 'Yeah, you're right. I'm queer, I'm a crip. So what?' undercuts the power of those who want us dead."<sup>30</sup> At other times they are

reworked as clever comebacks. In *Crippled, Queer, and Legally Blond(e)* DeFelice rearticulates *cripple* overtly. Dressed in jeans and a tweed blazer, he begins his monologue by pacing in front of his audience as if giving a serious lecture and ends it with giddy rapture: “When I was a crippled child, I couldn’t play baseball because I was a crippled child. . . . I didn’t stay in school all day because I was a crippled child. I stayed home all day whenever the hell I wanted because I was a crippled child. Crippled was good. Cripples have class. It sounds like Victorian back bedrooms. I love that. It’s got mystery!”<sup>31</sup> With each repetition DeFelice makes *cripple* signify differently: as a word once used to exclude him, then one he learned to manipulate for his own purposes, and finally one that exudes panache.

### Verbs: Queering and Crippling

Queers and cripples often experience profound isolation while growing up, since they are rarely born into queer or crip families, much less communities. To cope with this isolation, and to resist the negative interpellations of being queer or crippled (not to mention queer *and* crippled), members of both groups have developed a wry critique of hegemonic norms. In queer communities, the application of this critique has been given its own verb: *to queer*. Queering describes the practices of putting a spin on mainstream representations to reveal latent queer subtexts; of appropriating a representation for one’s own purposes, forcing it to signify differently; or of deconstructing a representation’s heterosexism. Similarly, some disabled people practice “cripping.” Crippling spins mainstream representations or practices to reveal able-bodied assumptions and exclusionary effects. Both queering and crippling expose the arbitrary delineation between normal and defective and the negative social ramifications of attempts to homogenize humanity, and both disarm what is painful with wicked humor, including camp.

In performance, the artists under discussion sometimes use queering and crippling against one another; they “queer the crip” and “crip the queer.” That is, queering critiques and expands notions of what it means to be crippled, and crippling critiques and expands notions of what it means to be queer. For example, Walloch cripps the queer in the following monologue by contextualizing gay men not as erotic objects but as objects of pity. Sitting on a chair with his crutches in hand and speaking to the audience as if he were looking into a camera, he makes a mock plea for an end to a crisis in the gay community: illiteracy. In a syrupy tone, Walloch solicits contributions to the “Sheltered Gay Men’s Literacy Project”:

Gay Illiteracy is right here in our own backyard. You've seen the men in bars, in clubs, and at the gym; parties, sex, drinking, and working out. It's all they know. And sure, they're cute and stupid, and who doesn't love that? But without your help, they will never know the joy of reading a book while working out on the Stairmaster . . . and remember if you don't care about an illiterate Chelsea boy, who will?<sup>32</sup>

Walloch critiques gay men's gym culture by positioning the inhabitants of these hyperperfect bodies as defective, as "cute" charity children in need of a cure.

Conversely, DeFelice queers the crip in the following interview, videotaped by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder. Interestingly, DeFelice also invokes the cripple-as-charity-case model. During the interview he sports a hoop earring, platinum blonde hair, and a vest and tie covered with Mickey Mouse cartoons and gesticulates animatedly:

As a child I adored the telethon. Because I'd have all my play money out and I'd pile it up on the sofa. And yes, they were using us; we knew that. . . . But hell, there are worse things than being used to raise money. I mean, I love the idea of being on camera. Having somebody look at you. I remember I watched the cerebral palsy telethon all the time and they had a wonderful little song that they ended the telethon with every year as the drum rolled and they showed how much money they'd gotten and it was called "Look at us we're walking! Look at us we're talking! Those of us who never walked and talked before!" And I love it! I absolutely love it!

While many in the disability community simply denounce telethons' use of stereotypes for profit, DeFelice exposes the telethon's latent queer campiness by spinning the pageantry of crippled children walking and talking into something akin to runway modeling. His vest and tie parody the infantilization of disabled people.

Queering and crippling are both theatrical and everyday practices deployed to challenge oppressive norms, build community, and maintain the practitioners' self-worth. Butler explains that queering is a "refusal of the law in the form of the parodic inhabiting of conformity that subtly calls into question the legitimacy of the command, a repetition of the law into hyperbole, a rearticulation of the law against the authority of the one who delivers it."<sup>33</sup> Applying Butler's description of queering to DeFelice's demonstration of crippling, the mechanisms of queering and crippling become even clearer. DeFelice does not merely refuse the interpellation of cripple as charity case; he embraces it parodically by hyperbolizing the telethon

into a catwalk. The juxtaposition of these images calls the representational apparatus of charity telethons into question.

Public performances animate the hyperbole of queering and crippling by launching into the public sphere the rearticulation of oppressive laws that govern normalcy. Butler suggests that, through political rage, the theatricalization of queering can sever ties to shame.<sup>34</sup> While performing a story about an unsuccessful audition for *Sesame Street*, for example, Walloch begins with deadpan seriousness, shifts to parody of the tragic-but-inspirational cripple, and finally erupts into song:

A woman with curly red hair and a cigarette hanging from her lower lip poked her head out of her office door and she said “Send in the white disabled talent.” And I thought oh, that must be my turn. I glided into that audition and I counted one to ten, said the alphabet backwards and forwards, I was fantastic, there was no reason I shouldn’t have gotten that part, but I didn’t get it, no I didn’t get that part. . . . You know what? This White Disabled Talent is picking his canes up and taking his show on the road. And you know what else ladies and gentlemen? They can never keep me down, no matter how long and hard they try. It’s my goal to become the most beloved disabled performer in America—no the world—I am going to kick that Christopher Reeve’s ass! This is my show ladies and gentlemen—AND I’LL DO IT MY WAY!

Walloch channels his rage by crippling a demeaning, shaming experience. Interpellated into the category of “white disabled talent” by the casting call, he transforms its power to injure by inhabiting it with a difference, a queer difference. Like DeFelice, he queers the cripple by stepping into the role of cripple with a drag queen’s flair, a tactic that hyperbolizes the made-for-television image of the inspirational cripple until it collapses into itself. At the same time, he cripples the queer by finding the cripple with crutches within the diva image.

DeFelice’s performance illustrates how the “parodic inhabiting of conformity” hyperbolizes not only mainstream but subcultural norms. At one point he removes his jeans and blazer to reveal a one-piece, red spandex exercise outfit that leaves very little to the imagination. Strutting and posing, he displays his crippled body while discussing his new capitalist enterprise:

So my exercise video is going to be called “Crippled Sluts in Spandex.” Because . . . it’s more important what you look like than what you do. Able-bodied people do not exercise because of their health, and neither should

we. That's the big fallacy of physical therapy. Nobody works out for their health. Susan Powter taught me this. Jane Fonda taught me this. Those girls know. So my opening would say, "Do not consult your physician before beginning this or any other exercise program." Gimp girls, you have consulted with that man many times, and look at you!

The interplay of crippling and queering here is complex. First, DeFelice inhabits the cultural law that disabled people should "improve" themselves through rigorous physical therapy. But he cripps this law by exposing its normalizing goals, rather than its supposed therapeutic ones. While many disability activists have criticized physical therapy for its futile attempts to make disabled people look "normal," DeFelice transforms it into just another version of exercise culture that attempts to discipline all bodies. Second, he parodically inhabits what the sociologist Martin P. Levine calls the "gay macho," or the subcultural law that gay men must conform to a "clone" image of the buffed, hypertoned, sexualized exercise body.<sup>35</sup> DeFelice cripps this expectation by replacing it with his own gimp, flamboyant, sissy body in performance. Third, he queers and cripps the entire mixed-gender, mixed-sexual-identity, mixed-ability audience by referring to everyone in it as "we" and "gimp girls." DeFelice molds his spectators into an audience conceived in his own image. Taking on the role of exercise diva, he admonishes everyone else for not measuring up to his crippled beauty. He presents his own body as evidence of the beautifying effects of exercise alongside the bodies of Susan Powter and Jane Fonda.

### **Coming Out As Crip**

By displaying his impaired body, DeFelice not only hyperbolizes normalizing laws but asserts his identity as a radical cripple. Flaunting their bodies onstage while discussing their impairments, solo crip performers make their difference visible on their own terms. Doing so violates the cultural law dictating that disabled people engage in what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls "stigma management," or the effort to put the nondisabled at ease by hiding or minimizing the appearance and impact of impairments.<sup>36</sup> Stigma management can be considered an everyday performance of passing in which even the most visibly impaired people attempt to deflect the label of disability. The process of stigma management is activated by the nondisabled, who scrutinize the disabled body for information on which to base a potential interaction.<sup>37</sup> "To be granted fully human status by normates," writes Garland-Thomson, "disabled people must learn to manage relationships

from the beginning. In other words, disabled people must use charm, intimidation, ardor, deference, humor, or entertainment to relieve nondisabled people of their discomfort. Those of us with disabilities are supplicants and minstrels, striving to create valued representations of ourselves in our relations with the nondisabled majority" (13). Garland-Thomson's assertion that people with disabilities consciously perform their identities in everyday life points to the performative nature of identity itself. Many queers and cripples seem acutely cognizant of their performativity. As Hughes and Román indicate, "Even out queer people often retain a sense that gender and sexuality, including heterosexuality, are performative."<sup>38</sup> When radical crips come out publicly as such, they choose to perform alternatives to stigma management in everyday life and onstage.

These performance artists point out that many cripples and queers consider identity not something essential, transparent, neutral, or natural but a self-consciously crafted act. Most often, the representation that disabled people, even those with obvious physical impairments, attempt in everyday life is the illusion of able-bodiedness. The only other acceptable cultural representations are the "charity case" and the "overcomer." Unlike passing, in which the objective is to deny disability by deflecting attention from impairment, the roles of charity case and overcomer deny disability by focusing on impairment so as to appeal to a benefactor's sympathies. Galloway tells about one such everyday performance:

I had to go to the Rehabilitation Services and act deaf so I could get two government issued hearing aids. . . . How do I convince these government officials that I am really deaf, which I really am. . . . But the fate of my ears hinges on whatever performance of deafness I come up with. . . . So I went into that office and ping! I . . . got all meek and uncertain and my speech got blurry and I sat there silent, unfunny and glum. I couldn't help myself. I only had *The Miracle Worker* and lousy deaf jokes as my performance references. And I was desperate for those hearing aids.<sup>39</sup>

If one cannot pass as nondisabled, then one must at least represent one's impairment as absolutely impeding (charity case) or relatively inconsequential (overcomer). The charity case will be cured and therefore will be rid of the impairment, and the overcomer disregards the impairment by achieving in spite of it.

Crippled, queer, solo autobiographical performance artists show audiences how to perform disability by theatricalizing the performative.<sup>40</sup> They take center stage under the harsh spotlight of the stare, display their bodies, and speak unapologetically about impairment. This self-exposure is akin to the gay and lesbian act of

“coming out of the closet.”<sup>41</sup> As Hughes and Román note, “Nearly all gay men and lesbians had to ‘perform’ some version of normative heterosexuality before ‘coming out.’”<sup>42</sup> Similarly, nearly all disabled people had to perform some version of able-bodiedness before coming out as crip. Though the disability civil rights and culture movement is clearly informed by other identity-based movements (such as women’s liberation and black power), it is not too much to claim that coming out as crip was made possible by, and that the coming-out trope derives its meaning and power primarily from, gay liberationist politics. Whenever a disabled person comes out as crip, that performative utterance draws its strength from the sedimented history of its prior usage.<sup>43</sup>

In the performances under discussion here, the act of coming out as crip retains the force and power of coming out in general without falling prey to the trope’s weaknesses. McRuer, charting the devolution of the coming-out act for gays and lesbians, explains that when the 1969 Gay Liberation Front first employed the slogan “Out of the Closets, into the Streets,” it “suggest[ed] not simply that one claims a position (‘out of the closet’) but that one moves from that position to effect radical social change.”<sup>44</sup> Yet as coming out became “mandated and delimited” in the following decades, the imperative to take political and social action “into the streets” was lost: “Assimilation, rather than transformation, became the goal; increased visibility, it was thought, would lead to gay civil rights and acceptance into mainstream society” (35). Coming out is now a “suspiciously white and middle-class move toward ‘self-respect,’ not a revolutionary social change, and many contemporary coming-out narratives might be seen as products of this shift toward individualism and essentialism” (36). At their worst and most narcissistic, the stories presented at public events such as National Coming Out Day seem to be “pandering for heterosexual compassion” (38).

But McRuer’s critique omits something that radical cripples know all too well: compassion is only a step away from pity, and it is impossible to be equal to someone who pities you. *Pity* implies not only compassion but contempt for the object, who is seen as weak or inferior.<sup>45</sup> Pity is no remedy for hate. People with disabilities know that playing the “supplicant” does not win one civil rights or even common respect. Indeed, one can play the supplicant for pity all too well, as the prevalence of the phrase *Better dead than disabled* and the growing interest in physician-assisted suicide among the nondisabled population suggest. Like National Coming Out Day stories that pander for compassion, endless “inspirational” disability narratives crowd newspaper Features sections and *Chicken Soup for the Soul*-type books; often these narratives are written by nondisabled authors or by newly disabled people still adjusting to their new bodies and identities. But

I do not consider them crip stories or elements of crip culture; they fall squarely into the charity case and overcomer models.

In *Nickels from Heaven* Trahan tells her audience: “My shame about my body, the way I move in my life, isn’t mine. It’s a grimy nickel being thrown into my cup when I’m least expecting it, and I’m not going to swallow any more.” She equates unwanted charity with the shaming of disabled bodies. She also refuses any further attempt to avoid stigmatization by attempting to perform able-bodiedness: “A politically unaware non-disabled performance peer asked me, ‘are you trying to cure yourself? Do you think if you perform enough you’ll learn to walk again?’—I’ve learned to walk again, and again and again and again and again, but this time I’m learning to limp with partially paralyzed pride and I’m hoping the rest of the world will catch up.”<sup>46</sup> In essence, Trahan comes out as crip at this moment. By *partially paralyzed pride*, however, she means not a pride that is behind or inferior to others’ but one that is ahead of “the rest of the world.” She places the responsibility for catching up on the audience, not on herself.

For Galloway, disability, onstage or off, “is like any other performance—it shifts with the audience.”<sup>47</sup> So she highlights different aspects of her identity—woman, queer, disabled person—according to the situation. In *Out All Night* Galloway refuses the usual modes of stigma management by pointing out all her markers of stigma at the outset, even those that are not readily apparent. She makes a preemptive strike, claiming and naming her impairments before the audience can. She begins her performance, for instance, with a story about her deafness (and her bouts of hallucinations). This strategy resembles one she uses in everyday life. Her deafness might go undetected in a casual encounter, but Galloway comes out as a deaf woman whenever she must interact with anyone. She informs strangers that, because she reads lips, they must face her when speaking, must speak slowly, and must repeat their words; moreover, though her speech is clear, her accent and volume variations reveal her deafness.

While Galloway must draw attention to her deafness to facilitate daily conversation, such two-way communication is not necessary onstage. Nevertheless, she outs herself as deaf to draw the audience’s attention to her identity. She even points out stigma markings she no longer bears:

By the time I was twelve I was a freak. I had not yet had the years of speech therapy that allow me to speak this clearly. Or the miracle of contact lens[es]. Or the clever little behind-the-ear hearing aid like this one. No. My first hearing aid was a huge box the size of a Walkman that hung on my chest like a third breast. I had just gotten my breasts. I had just started my

period. I had hairy legs and hairy underarms because my mother wouldn't let me shave. I had a dork kid haircut, and I'd just broken my two front teeth playing a game of war. I was fat as a pig and wore these pink cat-eye glasses, always broken of course. And I desperately wanted to be normal, so I would hide my hearing aid box inside my blouse. But it's a microphone, so there's feedback—beep, beep. . . . I would take a step and it was: Bounce-Bounce! BeepBeep! BleedBleed! "I'm a monster, a monster!" . . . So they shipped me off to the Lion's Camp for Crippled Children.<sup>48</sup>

This passage makes explicit the interrelatedness between the stigmatization of deaf, adolescent girls and that of fat bodies. In the eyes of her parents, however, disability stigma trumped the other two identities. She was sent to a camp for *cripples* instead of, as one might imagine, a Girl Scout camp or even a weight-loss camp.

### **Crip Pride: Sexualized Public Display**

Coming out as crip appears to be an attempt to fulfill the Gay Liberation Front's original slogan, which combined pride with activism. Clare explains how one is necessary for the other:

Pride is not an inessential thing. Without pride, disabled people are much more likely to accept unquestioningly the daily material conditions [imposed on them by] ableism: unemployment, poverty, segregated and substandard education, years spent locked up in nursing homes, violence perpetrated by caregivers, lack of access [to public venues]. Without pride, individual and collective resistance to oppression becomes nearly impossible. But disability pride is no easy thing to come by. Disability has been soaked in shame, dressed in silence, rooted in isolation.<sup>49</sup>

Disability pride is simply not widespread enough to have slipped into cliché.

A primary way for crip-queer solo performers to express disability pride is to rearticulate the disabled body as a gendered, sexual being. They display and discuss their bodies as sexy and sexual. Queer performers have long used bodily display to counteract shame and assert sexual difference. Likewise, both straight and lesbian feminist performance artists have manipulated the male gaze by using their exposed bodies in unexpected ways (e.g., Karen Finley's notorious chocolate-smeared nude body symbolized the shit targeted at women). Feminist critics have pointed out, however, that these performers, whose bodies often conform to main-

stream standards of beauty, may inadvertently replicate the very objectification they seek to challenge. For disabled solo performers, whether male or female, the issues are different. “Objectification plays many roles in the lives of disabled people, none of which sexualize us.”<sup>50</sup> Unlike able-bodied women whose bodies are overdetermined sexually, disabled performers struggle to be considered sexual beings at all and tend to use nudity and provocative clothing simply to claim a sexual identity.

When sexualizing their bodies, though, crip performers seldom rely on typical modes of gender performativity. Clare explains:

To be female and disabled is to be seen as not quite a woman; to be male and disabled is to be seen as not quite a man. The mannerisms that help define gender—the ways in which people walk, swing their hips, gesture with their hands, move their mouths and eyes as they talk, take up space with their bodies—are all based upon how nondisabled people move. A woman who walks with crutches does not walk like a “woman”; a man who uses a wheelchair and a ventilator does not move like a “man.” The construction of gender depends not only upon the male body and female body, but also upon the nondisabled body.<sup>51</sup>

Because disabled bodies are often unable to perform certain gendered behaviors in “passable” ways, the disabled are often considered genderless (or less than male or female) and, by extension, sexless.

Crip-queer artists redefine gender and sexuality by crippling and queering both. Here, too, it is clear how coming out as crip, even as it challenges queer performance traditions, draws its references from those traditions, which confuse and rearticulate normative gender laws. As Butler has shown, queer drag, for instance, tends to expose the falsity of essentialist gender categories. But crip-queer drag exposes the able-bodied assumptions of these categories as well. In *Nickels from Heaven* Trahan flouts stigma and shame with her display of crip-queer sexuality. She begins by asking a volunteer to help her change from a tuxedo to a lace teddy with dangling garter straps and a wild, purple feather boa. Trahan describes this moment as it happened at the 1995 performance I attended:

A beautiful academic femme . . . volunteered to undress me on stage. She wore a long blue dress and long white gloves for the occasion of my defrocking. After carefully folding my tuxedo jacket and setting it aside so it wouldn’t get dirty, she whipped my belt out of my pants, flung it over her shoulder into the audience, ripped open my jeans and tore them off with-

out a pause. As I posed in my queenly lingerie, I stared adoringly amazed into her eyes, my scars and hard-on in full display.<sup>52</sup>

Even in her teddy Trahan reads not as a heterosexually feminine or even lesbian femme but as a crippled queer girl with a “hard-on.” Carol Queen, who has performed with Trahan (fig. 4), calls her “Shirley Temple Butch.”<sup>53</sup> But Trahan’s body also signifies “womanly”: she is curvy and ample. Her wild, curly blonde hair (which she works to full advantage) falls around her shoulders. Yet with her ultra-fem teddy, she wears butch black boots and black bicycle gloves (as many of us do when using crutches). She occasionally wields her one psychedelic-colored crutch overhead as a phallic sword or sings into it as if it were a microphone. Her movements alternate and combine, seeming feminine, smooth, and sultry but, at the same time, masculine, forceful, and smoldering. Trahan’s halting, deliberate gait, her careful speech, and her unsteadiness interrupt any moments that might be interpreted as uniquely male or female, straight or gay. The result is a *mélange* of identity markers: butch, femme, female impersonator, and radical cripple. Trahan, in a way, queers the cripple as a lesbian who borrows techniques from male drag performers to sexualize a body that society expects to be hidden. Trahan cripples the queer, too, by transforming disability paraphernalia (the crutch, the gloves) into drag props and costuming.

While in this outfit, Trahan tells the audience, “My friend Neil says disabled people are drag queens. Cause [*sic*] people see us coming.”<sup>54</sup> She pauses, then adds, “I see his point, but . . . sometimes I think Neil is a little too clever. I love drag queens though, at least when they’re not trying to pass.” As a visibly disabled woman, Trahan knows that being in drag and being disabled are not equivalent. She can put on and take off her sexual drag at will, but even with the best stigma management she could never pass as nondisabled. She claims affinity only with those who claim their stigma all the time, those who do not retreat into social acceptability.

The mixing of cripple and queer identity markers confuses what the disability performance scholar Petra Kupperts calls the “diagnostic gaze,” or the scrutinizing of disabled bodies for symptoms of pathology in search of a “true” diagnosis.<sup>55</sup> The queer body has undergone similar scientific and medical scrutiny for over a century. But while the diagnostic gaze aimed at queer bodies ferrets out symptoms of a “diseased sexuality,” the diagnostic gaze aimed at disabled bodies tends to negate sexuality. By asserting sexual, bare, crippled bodies that perform gender ambiguously onstage, queer cripples draw the audience’s attention to the ways in which the diagnostic gaze is aimed differently at cripples and queers in everyday life.



Figure 4. Julia Trahan (standing) and Carol Queen performing at the Queer Disability Conference at San Francisco State University, June 2002. Copyright © 2002 by Robert Morgan Lawrence

For instance, Walloch tells the following story as he walks laboriously across the stage without his crutches, wearing only plain white briefs:

When I got to the clinic I was asked to strip to my underwear, and after awhile a nurse would call me into the main room. In the main room sat a panel of about thirty-five people[:] doctors, therapists, and students. The nurse would give me my cue to begin, and I would walk back and forth in front of the panel. Sometimes one of the doctors would stop me, then move his hand down my back, grab my ankle, or poke at one of my ribs. I would wait until he was done, and begin to walk again as the panel took notes.

Then Walloch takes his story back in time, before this walk, to the dressing room where he waits for the nurse to fetch him. "I would sit on the metal chair in my underwear staring at the clock, and I would pray[:] Only five minutes to go. Please don't let it happen!" A wicked grin spreads across his face: "And then I would look down and sure enough, I would have the biggest erection I've ever had in my entire life!" Walloch exposes the erotics of the diagnostic gaze, asserting his sexuality and not allowing the story to devolve into pathos or victimization. He reveals medicine's tendency to negate disabled children's sexuality and makes us reconsider the meaning of the male doctor's hands on his body (a caress?) and his female nurse's directions (an S/M scene?). He confuses the audience about his sexuality: Is he gay? Is he bi? Is he turned on just by being looked at? In the performance I saw, the audience squirmed with discomfort and perhaps titillation at the real possibility that its diagnostic gaze would give Walloch an erection. His performance was especially challenging to this audience, half of which was occupational therapy and nursing students. By opening the show with this monologue, Walloch foregrounded the diagnostic gaze and let the audience know that he would not be a passive specimen.

In addition to claiming sexuality by displaying their bodies on their own terms, these artists assert sexual agency by recounting their sexual experiences. In *Out All Night* Galloway, for example, tells the audience about her love affair with another adolescent girl at the Lion's Camp for cripples. Who would imagine that a chubby deaf girl and a paralyzed girl who got around on a wheeled bed would exchange steamy kisses along the banks of the Rio Grande? "The counselors," Galloway says, "they were suckered. 'Those two little angels.'"<sup>56</sup> She transforms the invisibility of childhood sexuality, lesbianism, and disability from burden to advantage, a means of operating outside authority's gaze.

While Galloway's story occurs in a disability context in which two girls

unite against authority, another story of Walloch's points out the complication of sex outside that community. In the story Walloch describes his first sexual experience with another man in juicy detail. The man telephones him the next day to say, "I had a good time last night. . . . I've never had sex with a disabled person before." To which Walloch responds, "That's OK neither have I." Before conveying this exchange, Walloch has focused on his subjective experience of sex: the touching, the tasting, the textures. The man's comment abruptly interrupts an apparently uncomplicated memory of revelry. Yet Walloch's reply mitigates the potential injury of the interruption. He spins the comment in an unexpected direction by delivering it and his response to it in the same breathy excitement he uses to describe the juicy sexual details. Walloch deflects the man's objectifying comment by diverting its power to injure into his erotic repartee. Sex with a crip, for Walloch, is just another form of queer sex.

### **Bearing Witness**

The power of these performances lies in their ability to assert pride while drawing the audience's attention to the political and social issues of being crip and queer. Along with asserting pride, Clare maintains, comes the responsibility of "bearing witness":

Both witness and pride strengthen identity, foster resistance, cultivate subversion. . . . Yet we also need to remember that witness and pride are not the same. Witness pairs grief and rage with remembrance. Pride pairs joy with a determination to be visible. Witness demands primary adherence to and respect for history. Pride uses history as one of its many tools. Sometimes witness and pride work in concert, other times not. We cannot afford to confuse, merge, blur the two.<sup>57</sup>

We must not forget that even as we appropriate the terms *queer* and *cripple*, they retain the taint of their power to injure. This taint provides the fuel for a rearticulation.<sup>58</sup> As an act of witnessing, solo performance reminds audiences of the crucial social and political work that needs to be done. Queer crips also challenge audiences by raising questions about intragroup dynamics as well as the alliances between queers and cripples.

Galloway points out that everyday disability performances are crafted not only for the nondisabled but also for insiders:

At the end of the summer was award night [at the cripple camp]. . . . You had this steady stream of kids going up to the stage to get their awards. But I was the only kid who was mobile. . . . these were kids without legs, kids with artificial legs, kids on crutches, kids in braces, kids in wheelchairs, in wheeled beds, kids drawn there by pulleys. So when it came time for me to accept my award, I limped all the way up to the stage. As I limped back—on the other leg—I was thinking, even with all the paraphernalia making my handicaps visible—among those kids I’d just never be handicapped enough.<sup>59</sup>

With this story Galloway uses humor to critique the crip community’s often divisive, painful hierarchy of disability identities. Neither crip culture nor queer culture offers utopian spaces free from the need to perform stigma management.

DeFelice also articulates the complicated dynamics between people with disabilities and their allies. He tells audiences about the time he spent working at a center for independent living that was run mostly by nondisabled people:

They were always castigating me because when I talked to people in wheelchairs I didn’t squat. [*precariously squats, then stands*] Now, this body, it’s got its problems standing up like this. I went to years of physical therapy to stand like this, to climb stairs, and I can do a few poses but that’s about it. [*puts his hands on his hips and glances sideways*] You want me to stand like this and talk to you because you’re sitting down? To hell with that. We need new etiquette.

DeFelice then sidles up to a man in a wheelchair, his crotch inches away from the man’s face, and says to him suggestively, “What if you’re standing and someone else is sitting? What do you do, walk up to them, you say ‘hi.’ . . . You use your Jane Fonda skills. You wear a good belt. . . . it could lead somewhere.” Here DeFelice queers the crip by pointing out the potential erotics of the etiquette he has proposed between a standing man and a man in a wheelchair; he also reveals the patronizing political correctness of well-meaning nondisabled allies.

By bearing witness from the perspective of those who are situated at the intersection of crip and queer identities, these artists raise as many questions, as many sites for future theoretical and activist intervention, as they answer. A final moment from Walloch’s performance seems to delimit the coming-out trope’s boundaries for both crips and queers. Eating dinner at a Denny’s restaurant, Walloch is accosted by a man who has been staring at him: “Come on you fuckin’ queer look at me, I know you want to look at me. Lift up your fuckin’ head and

look!” The harasser then turns to his girlfriend and says: “You see that faggot over there? Do you see that fag? I am going to kill him for you!” Fearing for his safety, Walloch gets up from his booth to find the manager. When the harasser sees Walloch using crutches, he walks toward him, puts his hand on his shoulder, and says, “Aw man, fuck. . . . I’m sorry. I mean, I didn’t, I didn’t know that you were fucked up like that. I didn’t know that you were crippled and shit. You can’t be a fag.” Walloch ended the performance I saw with this anecdote, leaving the audience to consider the different implications of being queer and being crip in a given situation. What were his responsibilities at this moment? Retorting, as Clare suggests, “Yeah, you’re right. I’m queer, I’m a crip. So what?” does not always undercut “the power of those who want us dead.”

Nor is the irony of solo performers building community, even a temporary one, lost on me. Yet in their individual bodies they inhabit all the contradictions of activist rhetoric, all the glitches in theory, and all the possibilities of action for both crips and queers. Challenging Butler’s assertion that “illegitimate gender performance” is “authorized, and therefore made safe, by the not-real structure of the theatre,” Dolan asks whether the theater is “an equally dangerous site of anxious incongruity, of profitable, discomfiting looking, a place in which the work of stylized repetitions [performativity] is made palpably clear?” She concludes, “The theatrical frame doesn’t have to render transgression safe.”<sup>60</sup> I agree with Dolan, but I would amend her conclusion. The theatrical frame does not render transgression safe, but it does provide a context—unlike a Denny’s restaurant, for instance—in which dangerous identities can be safely rehearsed and safely performed. Not that these artists are preaching to the choir. On the contrary, they are preaching to a heterogeneous congregation of crips, queers, nursing students, occupational therapy students, allies, academics, people who walk and who roll, people who hear and who read lips, activists, and so on.

Crip, queer, solo autobiographical performance artists raise powerful, provocative questions about how identities are performed in everyday life and for whom and to what ends. They ask audiences to consider the implicit lines of demarcation that both divide and unite communities. Like these artists, disability studies and queer theory can inhabit the same theoretical body, a crip-queer body that retains all of its contradictions.

## Notes

This essay was inspired by many conversations over the years with friends and colleagues, activists and academics: Angelika Czekay, Jill Dolan, Steven Druksman, Holly Hughes, Susan McCully, Peter McDowell, Dan Savage, Stacy Wolf, and others. The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Summer Institute on Disability Studies at San Francisco State University in July–August 2000 provided an extended opportunity to debate the similarities and differences between crips and queers. I would like to thank Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and Paul Longmore for organizing the institute, which brought scholars from across the humanities together for five weeks of intensive study. For their feedback I am also indebted to my colleagues at two conferences at which I presented earlier drafts of this essay: the Gender and Disability Studies Conference at Rutgers University, 1–3 March 2001, and the “Body in Real Time: Disability Studies in the Humanities” conference at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, May 2001. In particular, I wish to express my appreciation to Sally Banes, Jim Ferris, and Robert McRuer for their generous comments on my ideas. I want to acknowledge J. Caleb Boyd, Ben Gunter, and *GLQ*’s anonymous readers, whose comments on an earlier draft helped me articulate the differences between crips and queers more pointedly.

1. At first glance, it would appear that the terms *queer theory* and *disability studies* are not analogous (the former denoting a set of ideas, the latter an academic discipline). In usage, however, academics tend to deploy these terms to connote a body of theory as well as a practical discipline. While, for the purposes of this essay, I could have chosen to use the term *disability theory* to make it parallel to *queer theory*, such nomenclature would be, at this historical moment, idiosyncratic. I suspect that *queer theory* is used more often than *queer studies* because queer theory emerged out of academic scholarship conducted under the auspices of already existing interdisciplines (women’s studies, gay and lesbian studies, gender studies). Disability studies, in contrast, had no predecessor in the humanities to house its emerging theories. For the purposes of this essay, I use the term *disability studies* to refer to the recent spate of interdisciplinary scholarship that considers disability a socially constructed identity category, like race, class, gender, and sexuality. Disability studies has also been called *new disability studies* or *disability studies in the humanities* (though I would argue that this scholarship takes place beyond the humanities). For an account of disability studies’ evolution see Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 1998). To make matters even more complicated, some universities have disability studies departments that study disability from the perspective of very traditional medical and social service models. I use the term *crip* as the parallel to *queer* for reasons that I discuss later in the essay. As of this writing, the term *crip theory* has not gained wide recognition in the academy—or even among

disability scholars in general—though the term is in circulation. If I had my druthers, I would replace the term *disability studies* with *crip theory* or *crip studies* to represent its radical edge.

2. Jill Dolan, "Geographies of Learning: Theatre Studies, Performance, and the 'Performative,'" *Theatre Journal* 45 (1993): 426, 432.
3. I would like to thank Walloch, DeFelice, Trahan, and Galloway for granting me permission to read and quote from unpublished material. For more information on Walloch's work see GregWalloch.com.
4. To say that these fields emerged in response to their antecedents' shortcomings is not to suggest that they entirely rejected the antecedents themselves. Each new incarnation of a discipline inevitably complicates and builds on earlier theorizing. Nor are feminist studies, gay and lesbian studies, gender studies, medicine, social sciences, and social services altogether guilty of the criticisms leveled at them by queer theorists or disability scholars.
5. Robert McRuer, *The Queer Renaissance: Contemporary American Literature and the Reinvention of Lesbian and Gay Identities* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 4.
6. Michael Warner, ed., *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xxvi.
7. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 223.
8. Susan McCully, "How Queer: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Production in Contemporary Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Theatre" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin at Madison, 1998), 16. In this dissertation McCully charts the genealogy of queer theory, queer activism, and their discontents.
9. Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet*, xxviii.
10. The line between the stage and everyday life can be fuzzy for autobiographical monologists. Interviews with the artists can even be considered extensions of their stage work and personae.
11. It could be argued that queer theory should maintain a productive dialogue with feminism, critical race theory, and other identity-based disciplines. See Phillip Brian Harper, Anne McClintock, José Esteban Muñoz, and Trish Rosen, eds., "Queer Transsexions of Race, Nation, and Gender," special issue of *Social Text*, nos. 52–53 (1997).
12. The performance scholar Sally Banes points out that solo performance in general has begun to wane with "the shrinking of federal revenues for alternative art spaces—including performance art spaces and festivals" (pers. com., 27 April 2001). Consequently, just as crip solo performance is taking off, the arts environment in which it might thrive is deteriorating. However, few crip solo performers made it in these alternative spaces even during their heyday. Walloch, Galloway, and Trahan have had moderate success, but none has risen to the prominence of a Hughes or a Miller. The

artists discussed in this essay have performed extensively for crip communities across the United States and abroad, though, as well as for queer and mixed audiences. Crip venues tend to be conferences and activist gatherings.

13. Michael Peterson, *Straight White Male: Performance Art Monologues* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 12.
14. Holly Hughes and David Román, eds., *O Solo Homo: The New Queer Performance* (New York: Grove, 1998).
15. There are a significant number of straight crip solo artists as well. But even straight crips might be read as queer in the broadest sense of the word.
16. In disability contexts, what theorists describe as “visibility” might be better understood as the condition of “being apparent.” In other words, the concept of visibility itself relies on a metaphor that assumes able-bodiedness. Deaf performers’ impairments may become apparent to hearing people when they speak, for instance.
17. Queer performers played a similarly key role in shifting the prevailing understanding of AIDS from individual pathology to urgent political issue during the 1980s and 1990s. For an account of how queer performance articulated an activist AIDS agenda see David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).
18. For an excellent overview of this shift and its importance to the passage of civil rights legislation, such as section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, see Joseph P. Shapiro, *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Times Books, 1993).
19. Walloch made this comment on a promotional video for *White Disabled Talent*, available through Cultural Media Icons (see GregWalloch.com).
20. Mark Allen, “MarkAllenCam’s Disability Interviews,” accessed on 22 March 2002 at [www.markallencam.com/disabilitygreg.html](http://www.markallencam.com/disabilitygreg.html).
21. Bilge Ebiri, “Diss Ability,” *Time Out New York*, accessed on 22 March 2002 at [www.timeoutnewyork.com/hotseat/319/319.hotseat.html](http://www.timeoutnewyork.com/hotseat/319/319.hotseat.html).
22. Unless otherwise indicated, DeFelice quotations are from personal e-mail correspondence dated 21 March 2002.
23. The primary organizers of the conference, Susan Crutchfield, Marcy J. Epstein, and Joanne Leonard, deserve recognition for an event that was truly life-altering.
24. For more information on Trahan’s work see [members.tripod.com/Dolphin\\_J/oz.html](http://members.tripod.com/Dolphin_J/oz.html).
25. Julia Trahan, “Nickels from Heaven,” in *BodyTalk = Survival: From Victim Politics to Human Rights* (unpublished manuscript, 2001), 127–28.
26. San Francisco’s original “Post-Modern Daddy,” Danielle Abrahms, an artist, producer, and teacher, passed the honor to Trahan in 1995 when they began working together at Build, a performance space Abrahms codirected (Trahan, pers. com., 23 March 2002).
27. Terry Galloway, “Imagination,” *Inside Arts*, November–December 2001, 51.
28. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 224.

29. Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End, 1999), 70.
30. Ibid., 93.
31. All performance quotations are from Robert DeFelice, *Crippled, Queer, and Legally Blond(e)*, in *Vital Signs: Crip Culture Talks Back*, dir. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, Brace Yourself Productions, Northern Michigan University, 1996.
32. All performance quotations are from Greg Walloch, *White Disabled Talent* (unpublished, unpaginated manuscript, 2000).
33. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 122.
34. Ibid., 233. Butler also emphasizes that performativity is not inherently theatrical and should not be confused with theatricality (234). This essay relies on the separateness of these concepts.
35. Martin P. Levine, *Gay Macho: The Life and Death of the Homosexual Clone*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel (New York: New York University Press, 1998). While Walloch verbally critiques gay male gym culture, DeFelice performs an alternative version of it.
36. Garland-Thomson described her ideas on stigma management at the NEH Summer Institute. She was building on the work of Erving Goffman, as she also does in *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).
37. In *Extraordinary Bodies* Garland-Thomson writes, “Feminization prompts the gaze; disability prompts the stare” (28).
38. Hughes and Román, *O Solo Homo*, 7.
39. Maria Beach and Leslie Pasternack, “Making a Claim on the Empty Space: An Interview with Terry Galloway,” *Theatre InSight* 9 (1998): 54.
40. Dolan argues that the “liveness of theatre performance [can] reveal performativity” (“Geographies of Learning,” 431).
41. Many people in the crip community describe their coming to awareness and embracing of disability identity and culture as a process of coming out. See the preface of Garland-Thomson’s book (*Extraordinary Bodies*, ix–x). At the NEH Summer Institute, McRuer pointed out that this process is not the same for queers and crips. His insistence that the phrase *coming out of the closet* not be naively co-opted by crips has inspired my line of inquiry here.
42. Hughes and Román, *O Solo Homo*, 6–7.
43. My take on this phenomenon is congruent with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s assertion that the “apparent floating-free from its gay origins of that phrase ‘coming out of the closet’ in recent usage might suggest that the trope of the closet is so close to the heart of some modern preoccupations that it could be, or has been, evacuated of its historical gay specificity. But I hypothesize that exactly the opposite is true. I think that a whole cluster of the most crucial sites for the contestation of meaning in twentieth-century Western culture are consequentially and quite indelibly marked with the historical

- specificity of homosocial/homosexual definition, notably but not exclusively male, from around the turn of the century" (*Epistemology of the Closet* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990], 72).
44. McRuer, *Queer Renaissance*, 33.
  45. *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 3d ed. (1995), s.v. "pity."
  46. Trahan, "Nickels from Heaven," 128.
  47. Beach and Pasternack, "Making a Claim," 51.
  48. Terry Galloway, *Out All Night and Lost My Shoes* (Tallahassee, Fla.: Apalachee, 1993), 8.
  49. Clare, *Exile and Pride*, 91.
  50. *Ibid.*, 111.
  51. *Ibid.*, 112.
  52. Trahan, "Nickels from Heaven," 206.
  53. Quoted *ibid.*, viii.
  54. *Ibid.*, 127. Trahan is referring to Neil Marcus, a crip performer from Berkeley, California, who is well known in the disability community for his autobiographical play *Storm Reading*, produced by Access Theater in Santa Barbara, California, in 1996.
  55. Petra Kuppers, "Towards the Unknown Body: Silence, Stillness, Space in Mental Health Settings," *Theatre Topics* 10 (2000): 129–43.
  56. Galloway, *Out All Night*, 9.
  57. Clare, *Exile and Pride*, 99.
  58. "As much as it is necessary to assert political demands through recourse to identity categories, and to lay claim to the power to name oneself and determine the conditions under which that name is used, it is also impossible to sustain that kind of mastery over the trajectory of those categories within discourse" (Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 227). The term *cripple* may be taken up again in injurious ways that have yet to be seen.
  59. Galloway, *Out All Night*, 9.
  60. Dolan, "Geographies of Learning," 434.



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