

The View from Queer Theory

Jane Gallop

In January 2014, I presented this talk as part of a panel on “Age and/as Disability” at the Modern Language Association (MLA) Convention. On that panel, I was the proverbial fifth wheel: two esteemed scholars from age studies, two from disability studies, and me. I work in the field of queer theory, and my contribution was to offer a queer theory perspective on disability studies and age studies. From my standpoint in queer theory, these two fields look very different from each other.

For the past decade, there has been a flourishing of work at the crossroads of queer theory and disability studies. In 2003, *GLQ*—arguably the most prominent journal of queer theory—published a special issue edited by Robert McRuer and Abby Wilkerson entitled “Desiring Disability: Queer Theory Meets Disability Studies.” The same year, an important conference at the University of Michigan on Gay Shame brought together a number of major queer theorists; that conference included a whole section called “Disabled Shame” (Halperin and Traub 181-216). I will here be calling this intersectional discourse “crip theory,” after the title of Robert McRuer’s 2006 book. The first time I saw McRuer’s phrase I immediately loved “crip’s” kinship with “queer,” and felt that was the direction I wanted my theorizing to head.

The intersection with disability studies has become one of the liveliest sites in twenty-first-century queer theory. Most strikingly, within queer theory, disability studies is *not a special-interest application, but an advance in theorizing queer*. For example, in a 2001 article in *Public Culture*, Eli Clare writes:

My first experience of queerness centered not on sexuality or gender, but on disability. Early on, I understood my body to be irrevocably different from those of my . . . playmates . . . a body that moved slow, wrists cocked at odd angles, muscles knotted with tremors. . . . I heard: “wrong, broken . . . unacceptably queer” . . . as my classmates called out cripple, retard . . . I stored the taunting . . . the shame in my bones This was my first experience of queerness.

Only later came gender and sexuality. Again I found my body to be irrevocably different. At nine, ten, eleven, my deepest sense of self was as neither boy nor girl. (361; emphasis Clare's)

This quotation from Clare exemplifies what I find most thrilling about the intersection of queer and disability theory. Disability here *is* queer, queerer than queer, a more powerful way to resist normativity, a more radical way to affirm bodily difference.

For the last couple of years, I've been doing a lot of reading in crip theory, as background to a new book project. While the project is still tenuous at this point, it is definitely rooted in the way crip theory resonates with my own experience as someone who has been slowly losing the ability to walk or even stand, my experience as a part-time wheelchair user. Becoming a crip, I want to do crip theory.

The 2014 MLA panel on "Age and/as Disability" had a substantial impact on my work, *even before it took place*. In January 2013, at the previous MLA convention, I found myself in the hotel lobby next to some people who were planning this session. As I eavesdropped, I realized something that had not occurred to me before. For the last dozen years, I have been dealing with a progressive disability that began at the age of forty-nine. I have in fact been living what our session planners called a "point of intersection between disability and age," an exemplary moment of "Age and/as Disability." Yet I have thought of it only as disability, not as aging. Imagining doing scholarly writing based in this experience, I was drawn to crip theory; it had never occurred to me to turn to age studies. My question is at once personal and theoretical: why had I never considered aging for this project?

As a personal aside, let me say that I now imagine my project as drawing not only on disability theory but also on critical aging studies. How that will play out is a question for my sabbatical this coming year. For now, I want to think a bit about why a scholar in queer theory should have found disability such an attractive identity, such a compelling theoretical move, and especially to contrast that easy attraction with the way aging never entered my theoretical ambitions.

First, I would think about the way *crip* can be synonymous with queer. Militantly asserting bodily difference, *crip* theory seems to promise a radical challenge to normativity. There is a strong line in disability studies of asserting what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has memorably called “extraordinary bodies”: “claiming physical difference as exceptional rather than inferior” (105). When disability becomes more explicitly queer, we find provocations such as Riva Lehrer’s in the 2012 volume *Sex and Disability*: “I will be one of the *crip* girls whose bodies scare the panel of judges. They are afraid that our unbalanced shapes hint of unsanctioned desires. On both sides of the bed” (234). For those of us who glory in the threateningly anti-normative, “*crip*” can look like a wildly sexy identity.

In the very same passage, Lehrer also suggests why a queer theorist so happy to embrace “*crip*” might not have wanted to go in the aging direction. The deliciously provocative lines just quoted are actually Lehrer’s reaction to a momentary consideration of her aging. Here is a longer version of the quote, which includes the two sentences immediately preceding those already quoted:

Old women disappear into a slow molasses of obscurity, even when they fight to be seen. I can see the day coming when the shape of my body will be chalked up to age and I will join the ranks of the Invisible Women.

Until then, I will be one of the *crip* girls whose bodies scare the panel of judges. They are afraid that our unbalanced shapes hint of unsanctioned desires. (234; emphasis added)

When Lehrer’s disability is “chalked up to age,” it will no longer “hint of unsanctioned desires.” Her extraordinary body will devolve from scary, anti-normative, hypervisible and queer to normative, invisible and desexualized. “Then,” she will *no longer be* “one of the *crip* girls.” The combination of disability and age threatens to undo the queerness of disability.¹

What appears above used up my allotted time on the panel. But I did not want to end there; I went over my time limit at the MLA in order to make a quick and sketchy gesture toward what I thought might be a potentially rich intersection of queer theory and aging studies. I

was trying to imagine a queer/aging nexus as vital as queer/disability currently is. I mentioned that the most prominent trend in queer theory of the last decade is an inquiry into “queer temporality.” A range of queer theorists have been challenging the normative life course that privileges reproductivity and devalues nonreproductive lives and moments. For example, Judith Halberstam writes: “Queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities . . . outside the conventional forward-moving narratives of birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (2). So far as I knew, scholars using “queer temporality” have restricted their consideration of age to the category of the child. I went on to say that, from my position as a queer theorist only just recently considering age studies, the connection between aging and queer temporality looks like it could be very productive—a militant and edgy way to resist what critical aging studies calls “decline ideology,” the sense that after the age of reproduction, a person enters into decline (Gullette). For example, I said, imagine deploying queer anti-sentimental rallying cries like Lee Edelman’s “No Future” to value aged lives²

Just a few hours after the “Age and/as Disability Session,” I received an email from Cynthia Port who had been in the audience. The email alerted me to an article of hers in the June 2012 issue of *Occasion*, an article that “participates in the kind of dialogue between age studies and queer temporality” which I had called for in my closing remarks (Message). Port entitles her article “No Future?” “Although there are significant differences between queer sexuality and old age as embodied subjectivities and categories of identity,” writes Port, “these new approaches to queer temporality suggest intriguing possibilities for reconsidering the temporalities of old age” (2). Port notes how little work there has been at the intersection of queer temporality and age studies, citing only one published text, a 2010 article by Leerom Meddovoi.³ Meddovoi connects queer temporality theories like Edelman’s and Halberstam’s to Gullette’s critique of the cultural narrative of “decline.” Unlike Gullette’s work, however, Meddovoi’s article is concerned not with old or even middle age but with adolescence, thus perpetuating queer theory’s exclusive interest

in applying non-normative temporality to the young.

In her 2012 article, Cynthia Port directly connects radical queer temporality to old age: “the old are often, like queers, figured by the cultural imagination as being outside mainstream temporalities and standing in the way of, rather than contributing to, the promise of the future. . . . And like queers, the old have projected onto their bodies that which normative culture fears and represses within itself: the knowledge of eventual bodily failure and mortality” (3).

Port is here following Edelman’s formulations in *No Future*, as he delineates what is projected onto queers in the name of the Child (the promise of the future). *No Future* urges queers to take up our place as threats to the Child and to the Future, urges us to stand in the place to which queers have been assigned, the radically negative place of the death drive. *No Future* was published ten years ago, and in the intervening decade more and more openly gay people are entering the normative life course, getting married and having children.⁴ On this particular point, the American cultural imagination has changed so quickly that queer may no longer figure as the threat it was just a decade ago. At this point in time, the worship of the reproductive future might in fact devalue old people even more than it does queers. What if, following Edelman’s resistant logic, old people took up our place as augurs of mortality, refusing to subordinate our present lives to the worship of the future?

NOTES

¹ During the discussion at the “Age and/as Disability” panel, a woman in the front row raised her hand and announced “I am Riva.” She was pleased to hear herself quoted; I was thrilled that she was there, and that she liked what I said.

² This is where my MLA talk ended, with the final ellipsis signifying its unfinished, evocatory state.

³ Medevoi’s title, “Age Trouble,” alludes to Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, one of the inaugural texts of queer theory, placing “age” within the anti-normative valuing of “trouble.” Port also cites one unpublished paper by Melanie Micir, “Living in Two Tenses: The Intimate Archives of Sylvia Townsend Warner,” which has since been published in the *Journal of Modern Literature*. To this short list of texts addressing queer temporality and aging, I would add a 2009 article from the social sciences by Maria T. Brown, “LGBT Aging and Rhetorical Silence.”

⁴ As I write this, my local paper informs me that over 100 gay couples were married in Milwaukee this weekend, as it became legally possible for the first time. The local news coverage is all sentimental celebration.

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