1. Crip Negativity

My nickname in high school was Awkward John. I earned it because my name was John, and I was very awkward. Prior to high school, I had been homeschooled with my siblings in relative isolation, including several formative years on a farm about an hour outside of suburbia. The lack of contact with children my own age, paired with my readily apparent gender nonconformance, closeted homosexuality, and what I later came to recognize as a grab bag of mental disabilities, left me with few normatively developed social skills.

I walked too fast and carried a backpack too full. I sat so straight at my desk that my back never touched the chair. I demanded to be in the front row of every classroom in a seat that faced the door. I reminded teachers about homework. I attempted to spark impromptu political debates with classmates between sets of pushups at lunch. I asked out girls, who usually turned me down. And I held the hands of those poor few who agreed so tightly that our fingers would cramp. I was a theater kid but could not act, sing, or dance. I lifted weights with the football players but would cover my ears and run from the weight room if the volume of the stereo was turned too loud. Once, when a couple of boys were shooting spitballs at me during study hall, I slammed a textbook on their table. “The next time you hit me,” I said, gulping back tears, “I will fucking ruin you.” I then immediately went to the bathroom and cried.
And then, of course, there was the hug incident.

On my way to class one day, I noticed an acquaintance walking toward me, smile beaming, with his arms outstretched. I assumed he was coming in for a hug and, thrilled at the opportunity for friendly physical contact, I opened my arms in return. As it turns out, I was right about this person wanting a hug, but I was wrong about whom he wanted it from. I didn’t know that his girlfriend was walking a few paces behind me. Realizing my misunderstanding a moment too late, the person juked right as my arms were closing in around him. I lost my balance, stumbled sideways, and swung my hand directly into a brick wall. There was an audible *crack* when my bones made contact. I remember looking, dazed, for a moment at my palm before everything went black.

I woke up in the nurse’s office, where I learned that I had passed out, fallen backward over my backpack like a capsized turtle, and hit my head on the floor. Apparently unbothered by the sound of my breaking bones, my fall, or my unconsciousness, no student stopped to tend to me. The nurse found me deserted in the hallway on her way back from lunch and, with the help of the gym teacher, carried me to her office to wait for the paramedics. To this day, it is one of my most embarrassing memories and also perhaps the most representative of my time in high school. So many misunderstandings. So many missed cues. So many moments I knew I was being made fun of or outright mocked, even as I pretended I was unaware. So many times I could recognize my difference from the shape of others’ faces. So many times I could feel their eyes glossing my awkwardness.

Thinking back on my time in high school, I am struck by the palpable anger I continue to hold toward my experience. Some of me wants to let the memories go as unoriginal bullying. Kids being kids. Perhaps this is true in part; sometimes kids (much like adults) are just mean for no reason. But another part of me is inclined to believe that there was something else going on—something more structural at play that warrants my ongoing anger. After all, there’s always a reason some kids get bullied over others. Some differences seem to matter more, and the differential mattering of those differences
matters. The disability studies scholar in me wants to call the differential mattering of my difference ableism, as a way to capture the disciplining of my enminded departure from neurotypicality. While some of my classmates were equal opportunity bullies, destroying the self-confidence of everyone they encountered, this group was in a decided minority. The virality of my nickname—Awkward John—read against my apparent invisibility (i.e., left alone and unconscious in a hallway) would suggest that much of the bullying I encountered was less a result of random injury than an effect of people’s shared anxiety over my neuroqueerness.

The circulation of my nickname functioned as my classmates’ meager attempt to safeguard the normativity of their own ways of thinking, moving, and feeling. My awkwardness needed to be policed because, if left unchecked, it risked exposing the fragility of normativity more broadly. If my queerness and disabilities were not suitably stigmatized, if I were not reminded daily of my social failures, it would become far more difficult for others to avoid justifying the more intense forms of discrimination and segregation faced by other students, such as disabled students restricted to “special ed” classrooms or poor and racialized students who, because of redlining and gerrymandering, were literally bussed to other schools. In a lot of ways, Awkward John had very little to do with me and far more to do with shoring up the boundaries of white cisgender enabledness against the threat of differences perceived as far greater than mine. If I could be sufficiently abjected, so too could others.

Here is where things start to get a little more complicated. The field of disability studies and the wider terrain of disability activism often frame ableism as a collection of access problems. If a person can’t enter a room because there is no ramp, if they can’t participate in a conversation because there is no sign language interpreter, or if they can’t understand a contract because it is too full of unnecessary jargon, then that room, conversation, and contract are inaccessible. Inaccessibility occurs when disabled people and our needs are intentionally dismissed or accidentally overlooked. Either way, ableism is at work, barring disabled people from full participation.
But as my high school experience demonstrates, ableism casts a wider net than the language of access is able to capture. In my case, nothing about my education was inaccessible. I could get into the building and to all of my classes. I could understand the lessons and complete the assignments. I had a range of extracurricular activities I could choose from and participate in if I wanted. I had teachers who offered a variety of formal and informal accommodations to help me fulfill course objectives. And yet despite all this access, ableism still managed to make my life absolutely fucking miserable. If anything, I wanted less access, less contact with ableds, less time spent in spaces structured by neurotypicality, and less energy expended accommodating me into a community that exploited my neuroqueerness as an opportunity to ossify its superiority. Access didn’t eliminate ableism; it enabled ableism to bare its teeth.

This book is about the ableism of access; or, rather, how too concerted a focus on individuals’ access needs distracts from the messier, meaner, and more systemic ways that ableism operates in our world. Disability justice activist Mia Mingus writes that “access for the sake of access is not necessarily liberatory” (2017). In fact, access sometimes does little more than “reinforc[e] the status quo.” In the American education system, the benchmark for accessibility is what’s known as LRE or the “least restrictive environment.” As part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which guarantees all children “a free appropriate public education,” Section 300.114 requires that “to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities . . . are educated with children who are nondisabled.” In an attempt to minimize segregation, LRE stipulates that, as much as possible, disabled students should use the same classrooms, teachers, and curricula as their nondisabled peers. Access, in this case, is synonymous with integration. The more thoroughly that disabled students are integrated into the world of ableds, the more “appropriate” their education must be—or so IDEA assumes. But this version of accommodation, what I call integrative access, fails to account for how ability operates as a structural norm, informing the ableist cultures into which disabled students are ex-
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pected to integrate. My experience in high school was deeply shaped by ableism, even though I had all the access I needed for a successful integration. My education was “appropriate,” in accordance with IDEA, but the conditions under which my education took place made it nearly unbearable. Moreover, the access extended to me via integration worked to further legitimize the disenfranchisement of other disabled and differently marginalized students.

I am left wondering, then, about the political utility of access. Does the language of inaccessibility name the violence we think it does? And does the energy we spend demanding access secure the kind of liberation we want it to? These questions are best understood within the context of the emerging field of “critical access studies,” coined by Aimi Hamraie, that “challenges the treatment of access as a ‘self-evident good’” (2017, 13). This field does not deny the importance of access, but it does interrogate “the discourses surrounding access” (269), prompting us to consider “access-knowledge” as a situated and relational epistemology rather than a given and objective account of the world (5). If we’re going to talk about access, especially in universal terms, Hamraie reminds us that we have to ask ourselves, “Who counts as everyone and how can we know?” (5). This book builds on these questions to ask, further, What do we want access to, and why do we want access to it? I propose that access-knowledge is not only an epistemic object, per Hamraie, but also an ethical one. How we define access, deploy our access-knowledge, and direct our interests in accessibility all deserve critical attention.

There’s no question that we are living in a world plagued by access problems, wherein disabled, poor, old, racialized, colonized, trans and gender nonconforming, and queer people are frequently left without the basic essentials they need to survive, let alone the equity they need to flourish. It remains the case, for instance, that many poor and racialized children, with and without disabilities, are denied access to a complete education. Statistically, students of color are both more likely than their white peers to be diagnosed with disabilities and less likely than their white peers to receive spe-
cial education services (Erevelles and Minear 2010). I do not intend to downplay the classed and raced realities of inaccessibility in the U.S. education system or to cast doubt on the urgency with which we should be working toward greater access to better education for all. What I’m really after is not the availability of access but rather the outcome of access: What are we hoping access will do for us? What is the benefit of securing access to an education that purposefully misrepresents our country’s legacy of settler-colonialism and slavery (Lopez 2021)? Whom does it serve to demand access to an education that includes only cisheterosex within its sexual health curriculum (Hubbard 2021)? How is life improved for disabled students if access to an education means suffering the brutality of having their disabilities exploited to protect the integrity of their abled peers’ own insecurities?

Similar questions could be asked about the utility of access in other domains of life outside of education. In terms of labor, for instance, what is the value of access to employment when disabled people are one of the only adult populations who can legally be paid less than minimum wage (Selyukh 2020), when earning minimum wage is not enough to clear the poverty line, or when the working conditions at a job are so deplorable that they exacerbate existing disabilities or produce new ones? Regarding healthcare, how can we celebrate access to a medical industry that is built on knowledge gleaned from nonconsensual violence against enslaved Black women (Owens 2018), profits off people’s dependence on insulin to survive (Sainato 2020), and enforces sex dimorphism on children born with intersex conditions (Malatino 2019)? Or, in what way do we even make sense of increased efforts to enhance the accessibility of prisons when the prison industrial complex presents one of the greatest threats to many marginalized communities, especially people of color and disabled people (Weill-Greenberg 2021; Ben-Moshe 2020)?

In all of these examples, access might offer a form of inclusion, perhaps even a necessary form, but it is an inclusion bereft of history, as well as the ways this history continues to shape our ma-
terial present. As Mingus explains, access that can be reduced to integration does nothing “to transform the conditions that created inaccessibility in the first place” (2017). These are conditions that structure the very institutions and systems into which we have been demanding access. Institutions and systems such as public education, the workforce, the field of medicine, and the law were not merely made to serve abled people best; they were built on the explicit disavowal of disability. The humanist project that emerged during the Enlightenment era exalts the nondisabled bodymind as an essential characteristic of white supremacy, leading Dennis Tyler to conclude that “disability is central, not peripheral, to racial formation” in the United States (2022, 5). Mental disability, in particular, has been historically indicted as a moral failure, representing stunted development, rotted genes, and a threat to the evolutionary trajectory of humankind.

Along with cisgendersexuality, ability functions as a central pillar of whiteness and thus lies at the core of what it means to be a proper citizen and a productive consumer in the West. No amount of integration can undo the violence woven into the threads of the world as we know it. No number of open doors can air out the toxicity that stinks up the room. Access does not by itself fix ableism. To suggest or imply otherwise is to fall prey to a “cruel optimism” that can only end in disappointment when the access we demand merely shifts the variety of ableism we face (Berlant 2011). That is to say: Even if we get them to let us in, we can’t make them want us there. Even if they say they want us there now, how do we trust them after all this time?

Perhaps, like me, you ask yourself some variation of this question frequently. And perhaps, also like me, the answer leaves you feeling pretty bad. It can be difficult to feel hopeful, desirable, or loved when—even after you’ve been given access—you’re still left feeling all alone. Loneliness is unpleasant for everyone, but it takes on especial horror for disabled people who live so much of our lives in isolation. Unless you have experienced it yourself, it’s hard to understand fully the ache of watching others live their lives while
it feels as though you are merely aging. It’s not the fear of missing out; it’s just missing out. Day after day, season after season, year after year of not being healthy enough, not being strong enough, not being smart enough, not being attractive enough, not being happy enough, not being enough of anything to be enough. So when you finally secure access to something for the first time—maybe a concert, a graduate program, a job, a relationship, a surgery—and you realize that you are still feeling all alone, and that no one seems to care . . . well, devastating doesn’t begin to cover it.

I don’t know a single disabled person who hasn’t at some point felt, however ephemerally or fleetingly, that they aren’t, in the end, a burden. Because if we were anything else, so it seems, we wouldn’t be so alone. *Life would be easier; no, life would be possible,* we think to ourselves. *We could live if the world wanted us. But it doesn’t want us. We aren’t wanted. We are lonely because we are alone, and we are alone because we are truly and utterly unwanted.*

**Defining Crip Negativity**

The remainder of this book is about where lonely people go from here, from that feeling of stultifying isolation. *Crip negativity* is the phrase I use to describe bad crip feelings felt cripply. It refers, on one hand, to the many bad feelings that disabled, debilitated, and otherwise nonnormatively embodyminded people encounter with some regularity: pain, guilt, shame, embarrassment, exhaustion, fear, and anger, to name just a few. On another hand, crip negativity names how these bad feelings are felt: deeply, slowly, tearfully, fitfully, sleeplessly, suicidally, hungrily, among the long list of excessive and pathological ways that crips feel (Forrest 2020). On a third hand (because there’s no reason people should only have two hands), crip negativity captures a growing, gnawing skepticism I feel toward the language of access and the category of disability.

For some people, a version of this skepticism will not be particularly new or original. Disability activists and disability studies scholars have long troubled the stability of *disability* as it is typically
defined by the medical industrial complex. Disability is not a simple fact of the world, we say, but a carefully curated and culturally contingent idea about bodyminds and difference. Enviable and marketable differences are propped up as characteristics of “diversity,” whereas less desirable or less economically profitable differences have been historically relegated to the status of a disability. What makes crip negativity unique is that its pessimism is directed not at the definition of disability, per se, but at the function of disability as a category of being. That is, much as I am less critical of access’s availability than I am of access’s utility, I am also less interested in what counts as a disability than I am in why it matters: What does the category of disability do? And for whom?

Crip negativity proposes that the category of disability functions primarily as a regulatory mechanism by which humanity can be distributed and withheld. Whether articulated within medical, social, or political frameworks, disability operates as a plasticizing ontology, infusing individuals and populations with varying degrees and qualities of humanness based on their proximity to normativity. Of particular concern to me is the way normativity is structured by whiteness and cisheteronormativity, along with abledness—all mutually entwined and contingent vectors of power that glean their meaning by manufacturing opposition in the forms of disability, gender nonconformance, sexual deviance, and racial difference. Charged by overlapping and at times conflicting strains of negativity in queer studies, Black studies, and crip theory, I am intrigued by how the category of disability operates not only as a marker of abjection or marginalization but also as an invitation for subjectification.

By subjectification, I am thinking alongside transnational and feminist scholars of disability, such as Nirmala Erevelles, Janet Jakobsen, Christina Crosby, and Jasbir Puar, who all work to expose disability in its “global context” (Erevelles 2011). This context reveals that disability not only takes different shapes across cultures and history but also that these differing shapes contribute to the stratification of care and access, that is, “where the emancipation of
some bodies is related to the disposability of other bodies” (Erevelles 2014). Jakobsen and Crosby propose the useful “geopolitical model of disability” (2020, 78) to dial in on how disability identity and the language of access in the West can obfuscate or intensify forms of debilitation that harm people on the other side of the planet and in nearby communities who are never recognized as disabled. Civilian casualties of war, care workers, factory laborers, and survivors of police violence are all populations whose experiences of pain and injury can be exacerbated by the exceptionalization of the Western disabled subject. “The stigmatization of disability as deficit justifies the right to maim” explains Puar. “The production of widespread debilitation is key to maintaining colonial rule” (2017, 161). The category of disability can, all at once, signal a person’s struggle against ableism, reinforce boundaries around the definition of disability as contoured by Western medicine, implicitly authorize imperial violence by alleging a state’s mistreatment of disabled people, and capitalize on the effects of that violence to further entrench colonial authority.

It is worth reiterating that crip negativity is not merely opposed to a particular model of disability; rather, it is a staunch critique of the category of disability in all its medical, social, and political variations. The problem with disability, much like the problem with access, is not definitional but structural. Disability gleans its rhetorical power from specific historical, cultural, and geographic contexts, and these contexts pervade all frameworks for understanding disability—no matter how conservative or progressive. On the conservative end, the medical model defines disability as a problem with the body or mind that demands rehabilitation, management, or cure. Missing from this definition is an awareness that the criteria defining “problematic” bodies or minds have varied throughout history and across cultures. More progressive models of disability, such as the social model (Shakespeare 2006), the cultural model (Snyder and Mitchell 2005), and the political/relational model (Kafer 2013), have attempted to counter the medical model by troubling the naturalness of disability or by revealing the category’s political potentialities. But I fear that even these progressive
frameworks either smuggle in the organizing logics of the medical model, and thus bar sociocultural contextualization, or they attempt to account for that context by emptying disability of the conditions surrounding its own emergence. In both cases, disability is fantasized as a recuperable object, one that can be endlessly repurposed without fully reconciling how it came to be in the first place.

The social model, for example, promotes the idea that disability is a product of the built environment, that disability is not reducible to “flaws” in an individual’s body or mind but is produced by the “misfit” between an individual’s impairments and an environment that was not designed for them (Garland-Thomson 2011). While this model does an excellent job of interrogating the individualizing impulse of the medical model, it does little to contest the criteria by which we recognize an impairment as an impairment. In other words, the social model interrogates the cause of disability phenomenology but not the assumption of a stable disability ontology, leaving unchecked the medical model’s implicit assertion that disabled, as a subject position, is primordial.

Other progressive models of disability are more critical of disability’s ontological status, but their attempts to salvage the category remain suspicious. For example, Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell’s “cultural model of disability” effectively identifies the reciprocal relationship between “therapeutic beliefs about disability and disabled people’s experiences” (2005, 7). They recognize that who disabled people understand themselves to be, including their identification as disabled, is informed by the medical model, even if that model is disavowed. “Impairment,” Snyder and Mitchell explain, “is both human variation encountering environmental obstacles and socially mediated difference that lends group identity and phenomenological perspective” (10). Disability, in this sense, can never be fully disentangled from the medical model because that model has already delimited our terms of engagement.

Alison Kafer addresses this frustrating tether by turning it into a political opportunity. Her political/relational model of disability “recognizes the difficulty in determining who is included in the
term ‘disabled,’ refusing any assumption that it refers to a discrete group of particular people with certain similar essential qualities” (2013, 10). For Kafer, disability’s politics emerge from its inherent instability and from the idea that it, much like queer in queer studies, is forever “open to dissent and debate” (9). It’s because of this instability, rather than in spite of it, Kafer argues, that the category of disability can be capacious and flexible beyond the boundaries of the medical industrial complex. As much as I appreciate Snyder and Mitchell’s cross-cultural sensitivity and share in Kafer’s optimism for disability’s queer volatility, I am wary of the sleight of hand that attempts to reconcile disability’s ontological violence without engaging the specific conditions that gave rise to the reclamation of disability itself.

It’s not my purpose in this book to rehearse the entire cultural history of disability, but it seems prudent to acknowledge that the originary context for disability’s sociopolitical turn is relevant to its ongoing political life. In much the same way that queer studies scholars have recently started to name queer’s intellectual history beginning in the 1990s by unpacking the effect of that history on the formation of the field, I am curious about the extent to which disability’s liberatory uptake also requires genealogical attention. In Disturbing Attachments, Kadji Amin argues that queer’s mobility is a siren in the waters of critique: scholars fail to notice what queer excludes because they are tempted by the term’s seemingly infinite expansiveness. Queer’s appetite appears to be endless, but Amin reminds us that it’s not. Like all terms, queer is selective. As I’ve written elsewhere, with every attachment queer forms, a “disattachment” rises in its wake (Smilges 2022). Amin suggests that much of the problem lies in queer’s sublated disciplinary history:

> Forgetting this history is useful to the field precisely because it permits us to refuse to define or to historicize queer, to say we are holding it open to indefinite becomings, all the while making implicit and explicit arguments that draw both their conviction and their appeal from queer’s affective charge, that is, from its disavowed historicity. (184)
Queer only seems expansive to the extent we choose to believe it is, to the extent we allow ourselves to feel that it is. We cling tightly to the fantasy of queer’s mobility because it feels good to believe in something. It’s nice to feel like we can count on an idea to do everything we hope it will, for once.

I worry, though, that a variation of the “affective charge” driving queer’s colonial impulse emanates also from disability, stemming from a series of racial and class tensions that developed during the early years of the disability rights movement in the United States. Despite their attempt to forge solidarity across differently disabled people, many disability rights activists struggled to make room for people’s differences beyond their disabilities. Issues of race and class, especially, were often jettisoned due to fear that they would dilute the potency of a unified disability identity. Jennifer L. Erkulwater explains that throughout the 1970s, leading disability activists articulated their agenda primarily in terms of “consumer control and self-help,” which contradicted the efforts of labor organizers and Black activists who were more critical of capitalism and rhetorics of independence (2018, 383; Schalk 2022). Despite pushback from Black disabled people, such as Johnnie Lacy and Donald Galloway who attempted to diversify the movement’s goals, employment and independent living remained the primary foci of mainstream disability organizing until the 1990s (Lukin 2013).

In order to secure government funding for these objectives, leaders of the disability rights movement, who “were mostly white and much more educated than the typical person with a disability,” worked to isolate the category of disability from other lines of marginalization (Erkulwater 2018, 380). Disabled people needed to appear as a coherent group, they argued, even if that meant downplaying the needs of multiply marginalized disabled people. While employment and independent living were (and remain) important metrics for civic participation, they did little to challenge the extractive logics under capitalism that equate an individual’s value with their capacity to produce and, by extension, to consume. As Marta Russell and Ravi Malhotra explain, “A strategy of disability
liberation politics entirely dependent on . . . purchasing power is so impoverished as to be of assistance to only a tiny fraction of the most privileged disabled people” (2009). Unless paired with additional, more radical goals, employment and independent living end up reinforcing the liberalism linking economic productivity, independence, and citizenship.

The disability rights movement’s concerted effort to rehabilitate the economic potential of disabled people resulted in a rather conservative political agenda. While more radical disability activism certainly existed alongside the conservatism of the mainstream disability rights movement, such as that carried out by the Black Panther Party and the National Black Women’s Health Project, it often adopted vocabularies and forms of expression that were illegible under the rubric of disability (Schalk 2022). Nevertheless, it has been suggested that the disability rights movement was a necessary building block for more recent and intersectional efforts toward disability justice. “Disabled citizenship and disabled world-making,” Ruth Osorio proposes, “share a complicated and interconnected legacy, illustrating the need for multiple forms of belonging in the pursuit of disabled liberation” (2022, 249). For Osorio, the disability rights movement helped to catalyze “a new era” for disability politics that could afford to be more critical of the forms of integrative access sought out by earlier generations (259). As a benefactor of these earlier generations’ efforts, I feel torn between gratitude for the life I have and frustrated by the compromises that made it possible. I don’t want to appear ungenerous toward the legacies of our disabled elders and ancestors, but I do want to be accountable for our community’s history, including the history of those whose needs were de-prioritized. Anti-ableism requires mutual commitments to anti-racism and anti-capitalism because disability, race, and class are categorically and phenomenologically entwined.

Among the most pressing examples of this triangulation is the welfare system. As Jina Kim argues, “Ableist reasoning anchors antiwelfare rhetoric” (2021, 80). Even if not all disabled people are in need of welfare, it remains the case that “the language of
disability undergirds the ongoing erosion of public resources” (82). Both the experience of poverty and the racialized figuration of impoverishment are disability issues, in no small part because Black and Indigenous people are more likely to experience disability than all other racial groups (Courtney-Long et al. 2016). By centering economic rehabilitation and neglecting to prioritize the uneven economic conditions facing multiply marginalized disabled people, the disability rights movement catered to those who already had access to a number of privileged resources. Moreover, by refusing to organize from the margins of the disability community, the movement ultimately contributed to the forms of racialized ableism that disproportionately harm poor disabled and disabled people of color. It was a political strategy geared toward integrative access: prioritizing the realignment of disabled people with existing institutional and economic norms over challenging the society that created them.

The unique needs of disabled people of color and those without advanced degrees were dismissed in favor of an agenda that universalized the category of disability by sublimating its contingencies with race and class. Economic rehabilitation appeared possible only because it had been thoroughly deracinated. Whiteness and wealth, through their unspoken centrality, structured the emergence of the disability rights movement, effectively laying the groundwork for a field of disability studies that itself depends on whiteness “as its constitutive underpinning” (Bell 2006, 275). The historical conditions surrounding the early years of disability activism and informing the birth of disability studies lead me to wonder about the implicit assumptions guiding disability as a reclaimed and explicitly politicized category. Is it possible, for instance, that the expansiveness of disability—not unlike queer’s mobility—risks a kind of rhetorical negligence through its implicit disavowal of the category’s own historicity? What does disability continue to exclude when we use it to cover so much ground? Whose lives does it obfuscate? What does disability leave unnamed when it claims to name so much?

Perhaps predicting these sorts of questions, Kafer proposes a “critical reading” practice that simultaneously “trace[s] the ways
in which [disabled people] have been forged as a group” and “the ways in which those forgings have been incomplete, or contested, or refused” (2013, 12). Critical reading, in this case, is a method of accountability in line with the one I mention above, prompting us to consider not only what disability is or how it means but also how it has emerged as a category of analysis. Kafer suggests that disability might be understood “less as diagnostic category and more as collective affinity” (12–13). Disability not as who I am but who I am with. Sami Schalk (2017) mobilizes this definition as “(dis)ability,” where the parenthetical captures “a system of social norms” that includes those regulating gender, sexuality, race, and class, along with disability. To theorize disability collectively is also to think intersectionally. It is difficult to find fault with this intrinsically relational approach. Who can deny the charm of intersectional, collective affinity? If we agree on disability as a node through which new relations can be formed, regardless of diagnostic status, there will always be opportunities for revision on whom the category can name and what work it can do.

It’s for this reason that I am persuaded by Robert McRuer’s Crip Theory (2006), which channels the political urgency of queer into disability’s unique phenomenology. The “crip” in crip negativity comes from my confidence that, regardless of the language we use to describe it, there is something powerful about embodyminded difference. As McRuer says, “It is not the term itself that is crucial”—whether we use the language of disability or not—“but whether or not, or how, it might affect or effect certain desirable futures” (2006, 41). Kafer and McRuer both believe in disability, no matter what we call it, as an embodyminded force that, through the maintenance of its existence, through the care we give to sustain disabled lives, can contest the ableism that structures our collective present. I join them in this belief, and my tender heart yearns for the hope they bear toward the future.

But if I’m being honest with myself and with you, I have some lingering doubts. These doubts emerge from my skepticism over the realities of building collective affinity in the context of disability, a
category that cannot be easily emptied of its pathological origins or neatly disarticulated from its steady march toward liberal subjectification. As much as I like the premise of redefining disability in terms of affinity, I cannot help but to worry that the terms will always be haunted by the conflicting strands of disability’s diagnostic past and increasingly liberal present. In the first case, I’m not sure how to get away from the irony driving disability’s internal grammar: that there is no disability without diagnosis, no diagnosis without symptomatology, and no symptomatology without able-normativity. Even with the rise of self-diagnosis in Mad and neurodivergent communities, disability identity remains haunted by Western medicine, out of which many of the racist and cishe-teterosexist criteria for diagnoses were developed. It’s for this reason that Calvin Warren (2018) and Therí Alyce Pickens (2019) both argue that in an antiblack world, insanity and madness are requisite conditions of Blackness. In the second case, disability can no longer be regarded as always already marginal. Sometimes it’s not-so-marginal. Sometimes, as the flourishing mental health industrial complex indicates, it’s even pretty damn close to normative. How do we establish and sustain affinity for the purpose of liberation around a category that flirts with normative?

Admittedly, pivoting away from disability and toward crip, as Kafer and McRuer propose, offers a tempting opportunity to short-circuit disability’s structural problems. Claiming crip allows disabled and nondisabled people alike to “acknowledg[e] that we all have bodies and minds with shifting abilities, and [to wrestle] with the political meanings and histories of such shifts” (Kafer 2013, 13). Crip invites us to think with Schalk’s (dis)ability, positioning ourselves not within an abled/disabled binary but within a “wider social system” (2018, 6). The cross-movement and coalitional potentials of crip are promising. Crip can do good work, and I have no beef with it. But we cannot make the same mistakes with crip as we did with queer and as we are currently making with disability; we cannot convince ourselves that crip has no history, no disciplinary context, no conditions of emergence. Shifting toward crip does not solve
disability’s ontological crisis. Crip cannot fix what’s broken with disability—and I use the language of brokenness intentionally—because crip is a descendant of the politics that broke disability. While crip does not share disability’s same pathological origin or necessarily its trajectory of recuperation into a respectable subject position, it was nevertheless born out of a discrete set of affective conditions in response to disability, its origins, and its recuperation.

Disability structured the emergence of crip, so it should come as no surprise that crip feels a lot like disability. Despite the fact that Carrie Sandahl originally theorized “cripping” as a critical practice meant to “expose the arbitrary delineation between normal and defective,” the word often appears in its nominal form to indicate an identity to be claimed or a position to be held (2003, 37). There’s nothing wrong with using crip in this way—Schalk (2013) proposes that its identitarian form can “work both with and against identity”—but its prevalence underscores people’s desire to maintain crip’s linguistic kinship with the category of disability. We are accustomed to being disabled, so it feels natural to be crip. But as Christina Cedillo and Remi Yergeau remind us, “Crip is a verb” (2019). Crip is meant to do something that disability cannot, and that something includes directly contesting the category of disability itself, especially its (neo)liberalization (McRuer 2006, 41). Too often is crip deployed as an extension of disability, a method of expanding the category to establish filiation with other identities, experiences, and locations. This work is important, but it cannot come at the expense of foregoing our responsibility to cripping disability.

I worry that, in the interest of preserving the integrity of disability, we are inclined to widen the category instead of to interrogate why it needs to be widened. In much the same way that we should be suspicious of spaces and institutions that belatedly offer us access, so too should we be wary of disability’s own legacy of inaccessibility. Crip can help us do this work if we let it. However, until crip’s critical valence achieves greater circulation, I remain ambivalent about its relationship to disability, just as I am ambivalent about disability’s relationship to normativity.
Crippin' Negativity

Among my intentions with crip negativity is to reignite crip, not in such a way that disavows the affective conditions of its emergence but in order to direct crip’s critical gaze back at those conditions and at the category of disability. The “negativity” appended to crip serves two functions: one descriptive and one referential. In the first case, negativity heralds the bad feelings I mentioned above. Disabled people feel a lot of bad feelings, and crips like me are additionally weighed down by the bad feelings we bear toward the category of disability. The initial definition I offer for crip negativity—bad crip feelings felt cripply—sits in the tension between disability and crip. I am referring not only to those of us who wield crip to critique disability but also to those disabled folks who actively work against the interests of other disabled and marginalized people.

Consider, for example, Greg Abbott, the disabled, Republican governor of Texas. Since I began writing this book, Abbott has blamed wind turbines for widespread infrastructure failures that endangered thousands of lives during a winter storm (Shepherd 2021), instituted Operation Lone Star that legalizes the immediate imprisonment of all border-crossing immigrants without formal charges or legal aid (McCullough 2021), oversaw the recriminalization of abortion through a “trigger law” that went into effect after Roe v. Wade was overturned (Mekelburg 2022), ordered that parents who procure healthcare for their trans kids be investigated as child abusers (Dey and Harper 2022), presented virtually at a National Rifle Association meeting within days the Uvalde school shooting (Talbot, DiCasimirro, and Richards 2022), and been subject to a federal lawsuit brought on by fourteen disabled children over his prohibition of mask mandates (Caprariello and Falcon 2021). As if that were not enough, Abbott has also previously argued against state mandates to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act and invoked “sovereign immunity claims” to defend the state of Texas against lawsuits by disabled people (Dallas Morning News 2014). This is the same man who has received near-
ly $8 million from a lawsuit he won over the accident that caused his own disability (Dallas Morning News 2014). The man is a menace, and he manipulates his own experience of disability to warrant state violence.

While Abbott may be rare in his position of power (though Madison Cawthorn, a former congressman from North Carolina, also comes to mind), there are many disabled people and abled allies who, despite their good intentions, wind up re-entrenching the forms of structural ableism that they claim to oppose. I’m thinking especially of when disabled politicians, celebrities, athletes, influencers, and even scholars sell out as inspiration porn, buy in to overcoming narratives, or attempt to frame themselves as existing at the pinnacle of oppression. The first group allows themselves to be exploited for abled catharsis; they milk the pathos that their disability elicits from people who get off on believing someone else’s life is worse than theirs. The second group trades in the opportunity for community with other disabled people for the pursuit of abledness, of achieving or reclaiming a bodymind that is adaptable to the world as it is, including the ways it harms others. The final group clings to single-axis, identity-based logics that pit disabled people’s access needs against all other communities and their needs, as if access is the sole property of disabled people, as if access friction isn’t inevitable in all liberation struggles, and as if we aren’t all trying to fight the same enemies.

How many more magazine covers do I need to see that feature thin, disabled white people bragging about their fitness achievements? How many more academic articles do I need to read that call for expanded access to inherently racist curricula or institutions? How many more times will I have to endure a debate on social media over whether a particular form of protest is ableist because it cannot accommodate everyone all at once? I’m getting bored, and I’m getting impatient.

These bad crip feelings expose the other, referential function of negativity. My original introduction to critical negativity occurred in the context of queer theory, an early iteration of queer studies
that blossomed in the 1990s. Figures including Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman represented a wave of negativity that cast serious doubt on the viability of LGBT politics. With what has come to be known as the “antisocial thesis,” these figures articulated a queer critique against the category of homosexuality for many of the same reasons that I am now troubled by the category of disability (Caserio et al. 2006). They worried that society had become so drenched in heteronormativity that there was simply no possible route to gay equality. The terms of society were tethered to heterosexuality in such a way that “resignification, or redeployment, or hyperbolic miming”—all the ways that gay activists had tried to articulate themselves as distinct from straight people—came up short because they were “too closely imbricated in the norms they continue[d]” (Bersani 1995, 51). Much like my frustration with efforts to secure integrative access, which seeks to accommodate disability instead of redressing the ableism that originally prohibited access, so too does the antisocial thesis launch an intracommunity interrogation of what queers really want. Is it assimilation or liberation? There cannot be both, these theorists argue, because liberation requires a total renunciation of society, a giving up of the social and its promises of qualified inclusion. “Without such a rejection,” Bersani says, “social revolt is doomed to repeat the oppressive conditions that provoked the revolt” (172). It’s only by disavowing the world we have that queers might begin to imagine the world anew.

The rhetorical force of the antisocial thesis comes to a head In Edelman’s No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive. As the book’s title provocatively suggests, Edelman argues that there can be no future for queers within the existing social order, which has come to be defined by “reproductive futurism” (2004, 2). Reproductive futurism refers to the compulsory nature of living in service of “the Child,” of future generations, that is, imagining futurity in terms of heterosexual reproduction. Since cis homosexuals, who were the primary subject of Edelman’s thinking, cannot reproduce on their own, they come to represent “the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or
form” (4). For him, queers are the necessary antagonists to reproductive futurism and, as such, will never be able to secure social legitimacy. “Neither liberal inclusionism . . . nor the redemptive hope of producing brave new social collectivities” Edelman warns, “can escape the insistence of the antisocial in social organization” (Caserio et al. 2006, 821). The antisocial thesis names negativity not as a queer position but as the queer position. This dismal conclusion leads Edelman to describe the trajectory of queer life in terms of “the death drive,” an unrelenting magnetism between queers and everything the social is not (2004, 9).

Rather than continue a failed project of contesting our constitutive abjection, Edelman proposes that queers opt for an “embrace of queer negativity”—one that does not attempt to invent an alternative social order but, instead, rejects the social and futurity altogether, effectively “dispossess[ing] the social order of the ground on which it rests” (6). For Edelman, negativity is both the extant position that the social order has forced queers to assume and an affective anti-politic that leads to the social order’s undoing. By altering how we approach negativity, by rendering the death drive desirable, No Future calls queers forth as the ultimate “advocates of abortion” and as evangelizers of the bad news that “the future is mere repetition and just as lethal as the past” (31). Queers need to stop trying to fix the world, Edelman suggests, because the world is not broken. You can’t fix rotten.

Readers who are familiar with Edelman’s polemic and with the antisocial thesis will likely know that both have been widely critiqued. As queer of color and disabled scholars point out, the antisocial thesis depends on sweeping claims that, while energetically tempting (it’s fun to vibe with), ignore important differences between abled white gays and people who are differently marginalized. Jeff Nunokawa refers to this problem as monism, the presumption that society can be reduced to “a univocal entity” and that all of us are “more or less indifferent instantiations . . . of this entity” (2007, 558). It’s easier to propose antisolciality as the singular solution to reproductive futurism when so much complexity is left
out of the equation, especially when that complexity includes lived experiences that you yourself have not had. The univocal entity implied by the antisocial thesis is a fantasy of oversimplified power dynamics dreamt up by a small group of white gay men who neglect to recognize the relative privilege of their perspective.

Instead of qualifying their claims by situating the plight of white gays alongside other struggles for liberation, this group purports to speak from “the View from Nowhere,” which Courtney Bailey reads Susan Bordo to mean that their work “relies . . . on a closed system that feigns universality and casts material and personal experience as irrelevant to abstract theorizing” (2019). Both disability and race, alongside other axes of difference beyond sexuality, become moot points that distract from, rather than nuance, theories of the social. The antisocial thesis presents queerness as a deracinated, disembodied position, despite the whiteness and abledness that structure its conditions of possibility.

These racial and disability tensions take center stage in conversations about alternatives to No Future. Famously, José Esteban Muñoz and Kafer each position their oft-cited books in full or partial opposition to Edelman’s work. While both scholars admire Edelman’s dissatisfaction with the status quo, agreeing that reproductive futurism is a flawed and dangerous system of temporal governance, they take issue with Edelman’s inattention to how different experiences within the existing social order necessarily affect the desirability of an antisocial position. Committing to queer negativity on Edelman’s terms, argues Muñoz, “is imaginable only if one can frame queerness as a singular abstraction that can be subtracted and isolated from a larger social matrix” (2009, 94). Reproductive futurism presumes a Child that “is indeed always already white,” despite the real, wanting, and sticky lives of children of color, poor children, queer and trans children, and disabled children for whom the future is rarely offered and never guaranteed (95).

Quite the opposite, these children are often “framed as sick, pathological, as contagious”—not only in biomedical terms but also as eugenic threats to the human species (Kafer 2013, 32). Kafer
points out that what reproductive futurism ultimately lays bare is the entanglement of race, class, gender, and sexuality under the banner of disability: “The always already white Child is also always already healthy and nondisabled; disabled children are not part of this privileged imaginary except as the abject other” (33). What harms disabled children, as well as everyone deemed a threat to the health and wellness of society, is not futurity but the unimagined futures for which we’ve allowed ourselves to settle. What we need is not no future but more futures, more choices, more ways of nourishing one another’s dreams.

It is this expanded, thirsting look toward futurity that drives Muñoz’s and Kafer’s projects. Muñoz’s “queer utopianism” explicitly invokes “not only relationality but also futurity” in order to call for “a renewed investment in social theory” (2009, 10). While he does not entirely disavow negativity, Muñoz channels it into a kind of perpetual dissatisfaction with the present, one that drives us not away from society but toward other, new societies on the “horizon” (19). Kafer, who thoroughly cites Muñoz, argues for “a politics of crip futurity” that pursues “an elsewhere—and, perhaps, an ‘elsewhen’—in which disability is understood otherwise” (2013, 3). She, too, does not entirely turn away from negativity, readily acknowledging “how futurity has been the cause of much violence against disabled people” (31). Ultimately, though, she joins Muñoz in a more leveled critique that attempts to mine alternative futurities for what they might still have to offer those of us who were never promised a future to begin with. Sean Lee has called these alternative futurities, collectively, the “crip horizon,” linking Muñoz and Kafer through their shared hope in “an ever moving future” (2019). It is a politics of futurity that requires, at the very least, a will to believe that a better future is possible, as well as the strength to keep trudging toward it.

The thrust of crip negativity lies between this will to believe and the strength needed to sustain it. I believe, along with Muñoz, Kafer, and Lee, in the possibility of a different future. I will myself into believing every day because without that will, I’m not sure I
could keep myself alive. If I thought that there was no future at all for disabled people, well, I don’t think I’d see much purpose in surviving the present. But I also acknowledge that some days I don’t have the energy to think much about the future, let alone to pursue it. Some days my bad crip feelings are felt so cripply that I live in a heap of tears and blankets. Sometimes I feel despair—total, fucking despair. While a part of me is tempted to read these days and times as aberrations, temporary departures from the longer oeuvre of my affectivity that is, perhaps, less intensely pessimistic, I want to honor the depth of my bad crip feelings as no more or less aberrant than the bouts of optimism I feel at other times.

My thinking on time and feeling is informed by conversations in disability studies and Mad studies on how people’s experiences of disability, trauma, and madness can contour their relationships to temporality. Ellen Samuels, for instance, tells us that “crip time is grief time” (2017). Clementine Morrigan offers “trauma time” as “a queer time traveling” produced by “dissociation, executive dysfunction, and confusion” (2017, 53, 56). And La Marr Jurelle Bruce adds “madtime” to name the “phenomenologies of madness,” including “the quick time of mania; the slow time of depression; the infinite, exigent now of schizophrenia; and the spiraling now-then-now-then of melancholia” (2021, 32). Taken together, crip time, trauma time, and mad time capture the affectivity of temporality, the dimension of feeling with/in time and sensing time with/in feeling.

Sometimes I feel like queer and crip politics oriented toward the horizon or toward futurity don’t let me sit long enough in my grief. My grief for my body and its scars, for my mind and its nightmares, for my parents and their fear, for my first love and his stolen youth, for my communities and the way we sharpen our pain, for our shared world and the weight of its history. Disabled people store so much grief in our bones; sometimes it holds us up and keeps us fighting, but other times it pulls us down, sealing us to the bed, bath, or silence. What I find so comforting about queer negativity is not its disavowal of the future but its capacity to pause in the present. Negativity gives me time to mourn. It lets me feel my bad
crip feelings as cripply as I want and sometimes as cripply as I can: screaming into the void of pillows packed around my head, kicking and pounding the asphalt with my fists, or fucking my partner so hard that the pain melts me into an oblivion that feels like nothing. And it’s there, in the crystalized moment of the scream, the pound, the fuck, that I can begin—not to imagine a future but to breathe myself out of the past.

It is with this appreciation for the way negativity holds open crip, trauma, and mad time that I find myself unable to part with Edelman, even as I acknowledge the flaws in his thinking. The antisocial thesis allows me to indulge my negativity without demanding justification or immediate political application. Sometimes I just want to be sad! I just want to be mad! I just want to be disappointed. My intention is not to reclaim the antisocial thesis so much as it is to expand it, to turn its negativity back on itself—that is, to add queer theory’s embedded racism and ableism to the list of reasons I’m grieving. In some ways, I am parroting Muñoz’s own methodological reasoning in Cruising Utopia, where he chooses to cite Martin Heidegger, a philosopher with debated Nazi sympathies, over other thinkers who are more frequently cited in queer studies. Muñoz writes, “Although I too have a great disdain for what Heidegger’s writing became, I nonetheless look on it as a failure worth knowing, a potential that faltered but can be nonetheless reworked in the service of a different politics and understanding of the world” (2009, 16). No Future and the antisocial thesis are, for me, failures worth knowing. They offer errors to learn from, certainly, but they also offer a temporal structure in which that learning can occur. This structure, what I’ve been describing as a kind of dis/affective lag between the grief of the present and the hope of the future, might herald different futures altogether. Perhaps negativity needed to be disavowed in order for its value to be realized. Perhaps what the antisocial thesis offers, more than anything, is permission to be crippled by bad crip feelings, including those felt toward the model of anti-future futurism that the antisocial thesis offers.
Crippling Disability

Among the crippling bad crip feelings that the antisocial thesis allows me to name is my frustration with the category of disability, the way it, too, is increasingly being used to promise a kind of future that I don’t want. This is a future geared not only toward reproduction, à la reproductive futurism, but also toward a form of rehabilitation that “fantasize[s] the eradication of disability” (Mollow 2012, 288). According to Anna Mollow, such “rehabilitative futurism” works alongside reproductive futurism to ensure the continuity of heterablenornormativity through the elimination of disability, whether by way of “a recovery of a crippled (or hobbled) economy, a cure for society’s ills, [or] an end to suffering and disease” (288). Channeling the reflexive negativity described above, we might also understand rehabilitative futurism in terms of disability’s subjectification, its capacitiation.

I am referring to forms of state and institutional recognition that interpellate disability into a respectable and perhaps even desirable subject position, one that can be invoked to justify the ongoing abjection of poor and racialized populations. This is a futurism marked not by the rehabilitation of disabled people into nondisabled people but by the rehabilitation of disabled people into proper citizens of the state: people granted rights and protection under antidiscrimination laws by a nation occupying the unceded lands of native and Indigenous tribes, built by enslaved peoples trafficked across the Atlantic, and sustained by a combination of extractive wage labor, stolen resources, a militarized police force, and a privatized prison system. Rehabilitation has never only been about altering the material bodymind; it’s also been about revising what the bodymind means, how it signifies. Rehabilitative efforts to resignify the disabled bodymind work in concert with attempts to secure integrative access: both are more concerned about the facade of inclusivity than with the conditions of embodying alterity.

The more energy we expend rehabilitating the category of disability into the liberal state and the narrower our focus on access for the
purpose of inclusivity, the more we inadvertently contribute to the “heteroperpetuity” of the liberal state itself (Bruce 2016). Thinking alongside Bruce’s use of the term, I urge us to be cognizant of how disability can be instrumentalized alongside heteronormativity to propagate white supremacy and anti-Blackness, ultimately ossifying heteronorms and “produc[ing] material structures and conditions to sustain those heteronorms” (2016, 169). Historically, these material structures have included the pathologization of Black gender and sexual configurations—racism and ableism cooperating to elevate the desirability of white abledness and to ensure the disrepute of Black and disabled people. The subjectification of disability introduces a variation of heteroperpetuity (dis-perpetuity?) that welcomes disability into an adjacent relationship with normativity so long as it reifies the benevolence of white supremacy and the settler state.

Earlier in this chapter, when I offered a crip negative definition of disability as a regulatory mechanism, I was dialing in on the dialectic between disability’s history and its liberal future. There is no question that disability and experiences of disablement are often linked to marginalization, but it is also the case that marginalization experienced within the category of disability must be read in the context of a humanist project that already excludes some populations from its borders. There are many people whose pain, whose embodyminded difference, or whose access needs are never matriculated in the context of disability: folks who don’t receive diagnoses, who don’t necessarily take on disability identities, and who perhaps aren’t even recognizable as disabled.

Instead, these predominantly poor and racialized populations experience “debility,” the term Puar uses to identify those who are “foreclosed access to legibility and resources as disabled” (2017, xv). Elsewhere, I’ve problematized the simplicity with which Puar approaches the relationship between disability and debility, noting that sometimes being legible as disabled can invite further debilitation (Smilges 2022). In this case, though, I agree with Puar that disability’s currency within liberal humanism depends on its mod-
ulation, on the careful selection and regulation of disabled people within a system of governance. By this definition, *disability* refers not to the antithesis of abledness or to a position of totalizing abjection; instead, *disability* marks proximity to the normative subject, as defined by the latter’s presumptive health, cis-heteronormativity, class status, and whiteness. Proximity to normativity however near or far, remains measurable within the category of *disability*, and this measurability works to ensure a degree of subjectivity, however constricted, that distinguishes the interpellable disabled person from the massified debilitated other.

*Disability*’s capacity to simultaneously confer and deny subjectivity is why I call it a *plasticizing ontology*. By regulating subjectivity, the category of *disability* operates in concert with white supremacy to adjudicate variations of humanness that shore up the able-normative boundaries of whiteness. Drawing on Zakiyyah Iman Jackson’s *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*, I understand plasticity as “the fluidification of ‘life’ and fleshly existence” that challenges the fixed, dyadic relationships between subjects/objects and humans/nonhumans (2020, 11). While plasticity is sometimes defined as a proxy for liberal capacitation, Jackson proposes that it does more than capacitate a thing into a subject. In the context of race, plasticity also “seeks to define the essence of a black(ened) thing as infinitely mutable,” such that the meaning of Blackness can be altered and repurposed again and again to suit whatever best serves white supremacy (11). The phrase “ontologized plasticity” is Jackson’s way of naming the mandated incoherence of Black subjectivity within the humanist project—an incoherence that requires both racializing and bestializing processes of abjection (10). Since the end of slavery in the United States, the ontologies of black(ened) people have been simultaneously capacitated into humanity while also retaining traits of nonhuman animals. Ontologized plasticity, particularly as it is embodied by Black women, effectively (though chaotically, according to Jackson) maintains the boundary between human/nonhuman without threatening the supremacy of
whiteness. Ontological plasticity forces us to think not in terms of whether someone’s humanity is recognized but rather “what kind of human” they are allowed to be and in what contexts (49).

With the phrase plasticizing ontology, I am thinking alongside Jackson to consider how disability is operationalized in the process of ontologizing plasticity. The language is tricky here, so I want to parse things carefully. Jackson’s ontological plasticity refers to a technique of racialized subjectification organized by a person’s plasticity, what she describes as “an a posteriori virtual model of a dynamic, motile mode of antiblack arrangement” (72). In this case, plasticity generates ontology. A person becomes known by their mutability. My intention with plasticizing ontology is to name a means by which mutability can be enforced: not an ontology gleaned from plasticity but an ontology that bestows or corroborates plasticity. That is, a plasticizing ontology captures how an ontological category, such as “disabled,” might initiate or sustain a person’s plasticization.

As a plasticizing force, disability aids in the maintenance of white supremacy by, on the one hand, offering legibility to Black and otherwise racialized populations through diagnosis and disability identity while, on the other hand, ensuring the pathologization of Blackness and the reification of whiteness as the definitional ideal for health and abledness. Disability thus participates in competing projects of inter- and intra-human speciation. The category upholds the human/nonhuman division through its exclusivity (rendering debilitated populations fungible) and stratifies humanity itself, diagnostically quantifying degrees of normativity. This is the “burden of materiality,” according to Emily Russell: “The anomalous characteristics that exclude individuals from full access to the political imaginary become the same features that structure their participation” (2011, 16). Far from being a straightforward indicator of a person’s relation to power, disability is better understood as a spectral metric, a mile-long threshold across which humanity can be parceled and ontological plasticity extended. To be interpellated as disabled is to be ushered into or further entwined with plasticity—situated on
the rolling hills of disaggregated humanity. This is a terrain that lies sandwiched between the disposable excess of the nonhuman and the impenetrable fortress of white normativity. Disability, in this view, is a discursive medium through which racial subjecthood can be materialized.

Importantly, I am not ignoring the ways that racial subjecthood can also materialize disability. As Dennis Tyler explains, “Any persons who pose or are perceived as a threat to the nation’s collective health could be contained, injured, or even destroyed, which demonstrates how metaphors of disability are made material on Black bodies and minds” (2022, 17–18). As an embodyminded experience, disability can be a product of a person’s racialization, such as through forms of targeted state violence. For others, disability can exist independently of their race, as is the case for many people with congenital disabilities. My focus here, though, is on the ontological work that the category of disability carries out as part of the humanist project. This is work that assists in securing the borders of humanity while also divvying up its splendors. Disability is a plasticizing ontology because it generates the requisite conditions, what Jackson calls the “bio-ontological currency,” to preserve plastic life (2020, 198). The category of disability offers some degree of liberal recognition without necessarily posing any threat to the dominant social order. Disability incapacitates through its promises of capacitation, which is to say that the category of disability bears far more ideological weight than many people give it credit for. In much the same way that an unqualified antisocial thesis risks masking the whiteness and abledness that subtend queer’s conditions of emergence, so too does an overly simplistic approach to disability—one that misses its utility to liberal humanism—neglect to account for the category’s own racial debt.

Perhaps it will seem obvious by now, but it’s worth emphasizing that being disabled or claiming a disability identity says very little about a person’s experience of ableism, let alone their position in the broader social hierarchy, and still less about their political orientation to their position or the hierarchy. Disability, it turns
out, doesn’t mean a whole lot by itself. Much in the same way that Marquis Bey argues that a person’s racial identity is “not an a priori determinant of politicality,” neither can disability be confidently or consistently tethered to an anti-ableist politic (2017, 277). As Texas governor Greg Abbott exemplifies, many disabled people do quite the opposite of anti-ableism by working within an “ideology of uplift,” to borrow from Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, which brands itself as a form of diversity work, despite ultimately functioning “in the interest of empire” (2013, 49). This iteration of anti-ableism isn’t really about countering ableism—at least, not the structural force of it. Anti-ableism that is focused only on uplift, on progress, on access, on re-capacitation/cuperation/habilitation is just ableism lite. True anti-ableism requires both an awareness of power as networked and a committed pursuit of collective liberation across that network. “No body or mind can be left behind,” explains the disability justice–based performance project Sins Invalid in its “10 Principles of Disability Justice,” “only moving together can we accomplish the revolution we require” (2015). This is an anti-ableism with a critical wingspan broader than the category of disability, a politic feathered out across the variegated identities, communities, and geographies impacted by the violently uneven distribution of humanity.

When infused with crip negativity, anti-ableism further reveals that the category of disability is itself often both an effect and a weapon of ableism, simultaneously its product and instrument. To be sure, some people are thrust into the category of disability against their will, and I am certainly not suggesting such people are inherently ableist. Rather, I’m pointing to the tricky rhetorical machinery that drives and disguises ableism: how we’ve come to believe it is fueled by the selective marginalization of disabled people when it is more accurately fueled by the dispossession of all bodyminds believed to be undesirable, unproductive, and disposable. While disabled people often take on connotations of undesirability, un-productivity, and disposability, we are not their exclusive terrain. Ableism can dramatically shape the lives of people without access to the category of disability, and ableism routinely operates in con-
junction with racism, colonialism, classism, and cis-heterosexism in ways that remain illegible under the rubric of disability.

I am thinking of the trauma left in the wake of incarceration, of the chronic pain rendered quotidian in the sew houses operated by U.S. companies on ships in international waters, of the nutritional deficiencies among children with “lunch debt” at school, and of the depression faced by trans kids whose access to healthcare has been criminalized. Ableism hugs the contours of all these examples, despite none of them necessarily or consistently maintaining legibility as a disability. I am left to wonder, given the breadth of ableism, why the language of disability continues to be the dominant mode of engaging anti-ableism. Who benefits from organizing done within the category of disability if not all people bearing the brunt of ableism are disabled? Whose bodies, minds, access needs, and experiences of pain and debilitation are invisibilized in order to maintain disability’s categorical coherence? Is it possible that there is something rotten at the core of disability—not its phenomenology but its ontology?

Crippling the Future

The more I ask questions such as these, which interrogate the ideology of disability, the more overwhelmed I feel by the affective depth of crip negativity. Efforts to reclaim or politicize disability are no doubt well intended, but how many of them fail to reconcile with the violence of disability’s structuring essence? Disability only becomes politically tenable in a humanist context, wherein the designation “disabled” accords a person with a measure of humanness. Even if we contest the value of that designation, arguing that disability means more or differently than able-normative society would have us believe, we have not yet addressed the underlying problem, the more fundamental ableism, that allows some embodyminded conditions to be capacitated into disabilities but not others. Moreover, we neglect to account for the plasticization of disability’s ontology, the way it demarcates a person’s distance from normativity—at once
wrapping an arm around our waist and holding us at arm’s length. This is *disability* as a kind of “burdened individuality,” to borrow from Saidiya Hartman, that welcomes you into the room, only to leave others still outside and to leave you sitting alone by the door: your presence a symbol of equality that paints over a lingering inequity (1997, 121).

Read in this light, *disability* has no ethical future. I am willing to stake that claim, even though I will myself into believing alternative futures for *disability* are possible. Right now, I’m feeling my bad crip feelings, and all I can manage to think under the wash of negativity is that there can be no ethical future for *disability* so long as it remains defined primarily by its capacitating telos rather than its debilitated excess. Without reconciliation, there can be no collective healing. Without collective healing, there is only more wounding guised under progress. Progressive wounding is not an ethical future.

In claiming no ethical future for *disability*, I am making the equally bold claim that the core problem with Edelman’s *No Future* and with the antisocial thesis more generally is not that they are too negative but that they are not negative enough. Edelman’s failure to account for the dispossessed futurities of queer, trans, poor, racialized, and disabled kids was a symptom of his broader failure of imagination. It’s easier to refuse the social when you can only imagine an existence in which the social has already been offered to you. It is much harder, Jack Halberstam insists, to refuse “that which was first refused to us” (2013, 12).

The antisocial thesis is limited by two, related assumptions: first, that reproductive futurism is a birthright and, second, that negativity emerges from deciding that the birthright is insufficient and choosing to relinquish it. There’s no doubt that it is insufficient—reproductive and rehabilitative futurisms are not ones I have interest in pursuing—but there is a privilege laden in the capacity to indulge this kind of refusal: to be able to say “no” and yet always retain the possibility of saying “yes” at a later time. The birthright remains, no matter how often or how loudly you disavow it. For
those who exist beyond the edges of society or whose entrance to
society is predicated on their ontological plasticity, refusal is anoth-
er game entirely. I’m talking about “the undercommons,” in Harney
and Moten’s (2013) words, that are made up of Black and otherwise
abjected people, spaces, and labor that, through their invisibiliza-
tion, disavowal, or sublimation, imbue the commons with its sense
of commonness. To practice refusal from the undercommons is not
limited to the refusal of reproductive or rehabilitative futurisms but
requires the refusal of the broader humanist project out of which
such futurisms emerged in the first place. This refusal is a form
of abolition, where the objective is “not so much the abolition of
prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons” (42).
It is not a refusal of the future we have mapped out for us but a
refusal of the society that could believe such a future is desirable.

In the context of disability, Harney and Moten’s refusal returns
us to my opening discussion of access. If anti-ableism is limited to
calls for greater access, it does little to challenge the conditions that
produce inaccessibility. It is not enough to secure disabled people an
invitation into the room, especially when such an invitation depends
on the intensified obfuscation or effacement of people excluded
from the category of disability. Access for the sake of access only
maintains disability’s regulatory and plasticizing functions. What
we need instead is a grander, more sweeping, and dare I say more
negative form of anti-ableism that reveals both the immediate harm
of inaccessibility as well as the legacies of ableist violence mixed
into the batter of our society and its extant futurisms. This is a
refusal not of a birthright but of a fantasy. It’s a letting go of the
dream, however soft and warm, that inaccessibility is the primary
problem rather than the invitation-only room.

The purpose of crip negativity is not to usurp the work that other
scholars have done to imagine new futures for disability, nor is it
to dismiss the value of activist efforts to expand access in the short
term. Such work and efforts are necessary corollaries to crip nega-
tivity that allow many of us to survive our refusals. Crip negativity
is meant to reorient us to anti-ableism in a way that both demands
more from the world and allows us the crip/trauma/mad time to feel the weight of our demands. In the short chapters that follow, each addresses what crip negativity looks like in practice, revealing it not only as an individual posture of refusal but also as a communal praxis. Even if crip negativity rejects the social as it is currently organized around able-normativity, we must still recognize the interdependence and care we all rely on to stay alive. I was surprised to discover just how much care I needed to write this little book. It takes a village for even one person to feel their bad crip feelings cripply. While writing, I depended on the shoulders, words, emojis, and kisses of so many crip and queer kin. It wasn’t easy for me to follow crip negativity’s affective itinerancies or to relay all that it demanded: in part because I nearly drowned plunging its depth, in part because of the hostility I knew its demands would elicit, and in part because by articulating what it wanted, I was forced to confront how much I needed.

Disabled people need more than this world has to offer. We need more than any amount of access can provide. We need more than the future can guarantee. We need more than the horizon can glimpse. We need more than a disavowal of society. We need more than a refusal of the terms we’ve been offered. We need so much that, as I write in the next chapter, it can be easier to silently steal what we need than to ask for it all out loud. Despite my own crip and neuro-queer commitments, I still sometimes feel embarrassed and guilty about how different my needs are from the needs of ableds around me. I know in theory that my needs are no more than anyone else’s, that abled needs are simply normalized and thus invisibilized. Yet when I’m the only one at the party who needs the volume of the music turned down, when I’m the only one in the movie theater that needs to have a meltdown on the floor, when I’m the only one in the Zoom call that needs a stim break, when I’m the only one with needs that are noted and notable, it’s easy to feel like asking for access, let alone asking for anything additional, is asking for simply too much.

This is one of my most common expressions of internalized ableism: feeling like I’m too much because I need too much without
offering nearly enough in return. I feel like I take and take and take from everyone around me without having the capacity to give back anything of value. It’s a bad crip feeling, this feeling. It’s crip because I know for a fact that I’m not alone in feeling it and that, while some of the folks who feel it with me are also disabled, many are not, even as they find themselves similarly suffocated by ableism: all at once confronted by an inaccessible world, disappointed by what access has to offer, and still left feeling inadequate of the half portion of a life we’re allowed to live. Crip negativity leans into the pain of this feeling, recognizing it as a necessary step toward liberation. It is only by feeling our bad crip feelings collectively, as well as cripply, that we can begin to demand all that we need to thrive. What we need is a lot, but we’re worth it. We’re a lot, and we’re worth it.
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