I’ve admired Robert McRuer’s work for some time now, and *Crip Theory* gives me all the more reason for admiration. Although over the past couple of years the overdue conversation between queer theory and disability studies has begun to produce new work that expands the parameters of both fields, most people—myself included—still find it exceptionally difficult to theorize multiple forms of identity, and multiple strategies of disidentification, in conjunction with each other.

At times, it has been tempting for left cultural theorists to approach this difficulty by way of the “excluded-here-is-any-account-of” gambit: in response to, say, one critic’s groundbreaking account of race and class in Southern labor movements, another critic can reply, “X’s account of race and class in Southern labor movements may be groundbreaking, but excluded here is any account of gender and sexuality that might complicate the analysis further.” Very rarely is disability invoked in such circumstances. But at its best, the gambit is salutary, urging liberal, progressive, and left social critics to take account of intersecting cultural formations in all their vivid and contradictory complexity. Occasionally, however, it invites an “additive” approach, in which identity categories are checked off one by one as they are “accounted” for theoretically. I remember vividly a colleague rereading, after twenty-odd years, the Combahee River Collective’s famous statement on the liberation of black women, one passage of which reads, “if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (278), and saying...
to me, only half in jest: “You know, they forgot about sexuality and dis-
ability—they only got to two systems of oppression, maybe three.”

The remark was only half in jest, though, precisely because lines of in-
quiry that fail to attend to one thing or another—gender, race, class, sex-
uality, disability, age, historical context, nation, and ethnicity (and I hope
I have unwittingly left out something, so as to prove the point by exam-
ple)—inevitably do wind up producing an incomplete or partly skewed
analysis of the world. The freedom of black women would not necessarily
entail the freedom of women living under shari’a law; what is true of
black men is not necessarily true of black gay men, and not necessarily
true of white lesbians anywhere; what is true of Chicano/a communities
and class relations may not hold for Chicanos/ as with disabilities and
class relations. Indeed, for many reasons, disability (in its mutability, its
potential invisibility, its potential relation to temporality, and its sheer va-
riety) is a particularly elusive element to introduce into any conjunctural
analysis, not because it is so distinct from sexuality, class, race, gender,
and age but because it is always already so complexly intertwined with
everything else. Matters become still more complicated when disability is
mobilized—so to speak—as a trope within what Robert McRuer (fol-
lowing Michael Warner, following Erving Goffman) calls “stigmapho-
bic” sectors of identity communities. When that happens, you find peo-
ple scrambling desperately to be included under the umbrella of the “nor-
mal”—and scrambling desperately to cast somebody else as abnormal,
crazy, abject, or disabled. Thus, in his remarkable chapter on Karen
Thompson and Sharon Kowalski, whose story involves disability, long-
term care, and the divide between advocates of gay marriage and advo-
cates of queerer arrangements, McRuer writes: “The stigmaphobic dis-
tancing from more stigmatized members of the community that advocates
for gay marriage engage in is inescapably a distancing from disability.
This is indeed literally true in one sense: commentators (such as [Gabriel]
Rotello) on domesticity and marriage offer marriage (for gay men, at
least) as an antidote to AIDS.” As an antidote to stigmaphobia, then,
McRuer offers a rigorous conjunctural analysis that leaves no form of
identity behind:

Queer communities could acknowledge that the political unconscious of
debates about normalization (including debates about marriage) is
shaped, in large part, by ideas about disability [and] . . . disability com-
munities, primed to enter (or entering already) some of the territory re-
ently charted by queers, could draw on radical queer thought to con-
tinue forging the critical disability consciousness that has emerged over
the past few decades.

As *Crip Theory* shows time and again, there aren’t too many people
who are as inventive and as rigorous as McRuer when it comes to read-
ing these kinds of conjunctures. In his noncompliant chapter on “non-
compliance” in the work of Gary Fisher and in Susana Aikin and Carlos
Aparicio’s documentary film *The Transformation*, McRuer takes disabil-
ity activists’ critiques of regimes of rehabilitation and uses them to find a
“problematic rehabilitative logic” that “governs contemporary under-
standings of and responses to what we should still call the AIDS crisis.”
He does so, moreover, by attending to scenes of “degradation” that range
from Gary Fisher’s S/M fantasies to Harry Braverman’s *Labor and Mo-
nopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. In
the course of articulating Henri-Jacques Stiker’s *A History of Disability*
to Marlon Riggs’s *Tongues Untied*, McRuer does not fail to note that con-
junctural analysis can produce severe identity trouble: “The proud and
sustaining *consolidation* readable in ‘black’ at the end of the twentieth
century could be understood as inimical to the *disintegration* put into mo-
tion by Fisher’s self-proclaimed ‘queer’ and ‘sociopathic’ identities.” The
subject in question here is a subject who, like Fisher, cannot quite be ac-
commodated or rehabilitated, and whose moments of consolidation and
disintegration render it impossible to read assertions of identity “pride”
as simple repudiations of identity abjection. Following Robert Reid-
Pharr, who in *Black Gay Man* argues that “even as we express the most
positive articulations of black and gay identity, we are nonetheless refer-
encing the ugly historical and ideological realities out of which those
identities have been formed,” McRuer writes, there is “no way of saying
‘disabled without hearing ‘cripple’ (or freak, or retard) as its echo.” And
yet, he adds, “that there is no way of speaking the rehabilitated self with-
out hearing the degraded other, however, is not a univocal fact. It is, in-
stead, a fact in multiple ways”—some of which can be recuperated, if not
quite rehabilitated, by the projects of a postidentity politics. Here, then,
is an analysis of black pride and disability activism that has been invigo-
rated and complicated by the politics of gay shame, and that retains
through it all a lively awareness of the multiaccentuality of the sign.

When McRuer turns his attention to popular cultural phenomena—
and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and the James L. Brooks film *As
Good As It Gets are nothing if not phenomena: the former for its comedic metrosexualization of masculinity, and the latter for its creepy (and therefore Academy Award–worthy) rendering of disability—the result, I think, is cultural criticism that really is just about as good as it gets. Indeed, if there’s anything better than McRuer’s reading of As Good As It Gets, teasing out the symbiotic relation between the narrative in which a gay man becomes disabled and the narrative in which he facilitates the consolidation of a heterosexual family (and, in so doing, helps to ameliorate disabilities in that family), it would be McRuer’s crippling of Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, in which he elaborates Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s foundational work on disability images while scoring the Fab Five for their casual denigration of “mental institution chic” and “retarded” straight guys and proceeds to offer us some seriously subversive suggestions:

A crip eye for the normate guy, I propose, would not just be a disability version of the Bravo hit, no matter how much pleasure imagining such a show has given me: “Sweetie, your university is an accessibility nightmare! Don’t worry, honey, it is your lucky day that disabled folks are here to tell you just what’s wrong with this place!” Rather, a crip eye for the normate guy (and because we’re talking about not a real person but a subject position, somehow “normate guy” seems appropriate, regardless of whether he rears his able-bodied head in men or women) would mark a critically disabled capacity for recognizing and withstanding the vicissitudes of compulsory able-bodiedness.

The biting humor of this passage is distinctively McRuerian, a term I expect will win wider currency once the full measure of this book is taken. But just as important, I think, is its dense and savvy allusiveness: listen again, and you can hear echoes and evocations not only of the Fab Five (tonally perfect, I might add) but also of Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and Adrienne Rich, all of whom are being mobilized—so to speak—for wholly new ends, in the service of an analysis that each of them helped to enable but none of them imagined being deployed in the context of disability.

McRuer closes this book with an optimism of the intellect and an optimism of the will: troping off the truism that each of us will become disabled if we live long enough, McRuer points us to a disability yet to come that is also a democracy yet to come. Along the way, as he moves from
Hollywood films to the Mumbai World Social Forum, from college composition programs to the debate over gay marriage, and from FOX’s neo-freak show *The Littlest Groom* to Bob Flanagan’s neo-freak supermasochism, Robert McRuer shows us that another world is possible, that another world is accessible, and that there’s yet another way of getting there. Unlike much utopian thought in the contemporary humanities, McRuer’s is grounded in materiality of the world as we know it—even as it points to a spectral world we do not yet know. Just when you thought you’d heard the last word on forms of identity and theories of cultural justice, *Crip Theory* comes along to show that another word is possible.