Mapping Difference:

Critical Connections between Crip and Diaspora Communities

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Citation

Abstract

This paper explores connections between crip and diaspora communities. I begin by discussing how the cultural production of racialized and disabled people are not analogous, but, rather, entangled. Following this, I reflect on a monologue by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha that articulates the knot between the production of land and the production of disability. I then discuss how our understanding of geography is related to our understanding of the people who are placed or place themselves in particular geographic sites. I use Jasbir Puar's concept of "debility" (2011) to unpack how the material and discursive production of people and land as disposable are also knotted. This paper ends by reflecting on how "unworking" (Walcott, 2003) our understandings of community and disability, the relationship between place and people, is one way of recognizing the "different stories of differences," stories that challenges the mainstream disability right movement's understanding of disability.

Keywords: community; geography; diaspora; debility; environmental racism; biopolitics; neoliberalism

La cartographie de la différence :

Les liens critiques entre les communautés « crip » et les communautés de la diaspora

Cet article explore les liens entre les communautés « crip » et les communautés de la diaspora. Je commence en discutant la façon dont la production culturelle des personnes racialisées, et des personnes handicapées, ne sont pas analogues, mais sont plutôt empêtrées. Suite à cela, je développe une réflexion sur un monologue de Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha qui articule le nœud qui existe entre la production de la terre et la production du handicap. J'aborde ensuite

comment notre compréhension de la géographie est liée à notre compréhension des personnes qui sont placés, ou se placent, dans certains sites géographiques donnés. J'utilise le concept de Puar de « débilité » (2011) pour déballer la façon dont le matériel et la production discursive des personnes et des terres, en tant que jetables, sont également noués. Je finis par une réflexion sur la façon dont nous devons « dé-travailler » (Walcott, 2003) nos définitions de la communauté et du handicap, de la relation qui existe entre le lieu et les gens, et que ceci est une façon de reconnaître les « différentes histoires de différences », ces histoires qui contestent la définition du handicap prônée par la faction dominante du mouvement des droits des personnes handicapées.

Mots-clés: communauté; géographie; diaspora; débilité; racisme environnemental; biopolitique; néolibéralisme

Mapping Difference:

Critical Connections between Crip and Diaspora Communities

As its title promises, this paper explores critical connections between crip and diaspora communities. I end up here, at the "promise of community," by way of engaging a few knotted relations, which themselves are entangled. I begin by discussing how the production of cultural meanings of racialized people and disabled people are not so much analogous, but, rather, are entangled. I then reflect on a monologue by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, which was delivered as part of a Sins Invalid[1] performance in which she articulates the complex knot between the production of land and the production of disability. This leads into a discussion about how the way that we understand geography has much to do with how we understand the people who are placed or place themselves in particular geographic sites. As I discuss how the meaning of geography and people are bound together, I use Puar's articulation of "debility" in order to explore how impairment and illness caused by environmental racism, workplace injury, and class warfare necessarily disrupt how we story disability in the disability rights movement[2] (DRM). Given that meanings of people and geography are so entwined, I end by reflecting on how "unworking" (Walcott, 2003) our understandings of community and disability—the relation between land and people—is one way of recognizing the "different stories of differences,' stories that challenge the DRM's understanding of disability.

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[1] Sins Invalid is a performance group working out of San Francisco, California. They are a mixed race, mixed class, mixed gender, and mixed ability group dedicated to exploring themes of disability social justice.

[2] Piepzna-Samarasinha offers a critique of the DRM in Goodman and González (2010). In this paper, I use "DRM" to refer to the disability rights movement that began in the UK in the 1970s, and which is still very active. I identify as being part of the DRM and, at the same time, I am fiercely critical of it.

Tangled Knots

My broader research project explores the ways in which diaspora communities and

disability, or "crip,"[3] communities are enacted in Toronto. When I began this research, I posited that

these two groups, which I understood to be distinct, were analogous because each occupied the

social position of what Walcott refers to as "belonging and not," as they lived in a nation in which

they were not desired, and, in some cases, not recognized, as citizens (2003). Being recognized as

undesired has many vicious and violent effects for racialized and disabled people, who are targeted

by racist police profiling and "eugenic" efforts,[4] both culturally-sanctioned practices of eliminating,

or eliminating the possibility of, the lives of disabled and racialized people. But already, through

these two brief examples, it is apparent that we cannot talk about instances of racism and ableism as

distinct phenomena. Both disabled women and racialized women are targeted by positive eugenic

campaigns; racialised people and disabled people are victims of police brutality. People who are

both racialized and disabled are targeted in particular ways. For example, a young, white, physically

impaired woman may be represented as pitiable whereas a young, black, physically impaired man

may be represented as dangerous; race alters the perception of disability.

An historical example of the entanglement of exclusion can be found in the historical

example of Ellis Island, the point of entry for many people trying to immigrate to the United States

throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries. The exclusion of disabled people was a principal aim of

immigration laws, whereas overt discrimination on the basis of race was prohibited under the newly

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[3] In my research I use the word "crip" to refer to communities of disabled and non-disabled allies wherein the desire
to be with disability is fierce and leads to political action in a world which largely desires to be rid of disability. My
use of "crip" follows others' acts of reclaiming language which has historically been derogatory, giving it new,
political meaning.

[4] Please refer to Sherry (2010) for elaboration.

emerging liberalism, but the exclusion of racialized people continued, as they were routinely

prevented from immigrating on the basis of disability (Baynton, 2001, p. 47). For example,

immigration officers would observe potential immigrants carrying their luggage up the stairs and if

they appeared to be struggling or to have bad posture, they were disqualified on the basis of

disability (Baynton, 2001, p. 48). As one immigration officer observed, "It was no more difficult to

detect poorly built, defective, or broken down human beings as it is to recognize a cheap or

defective automobile" (Baynton, 2001, p. 48).

Still today, as Meekosha and Soldatic (2011) and Erevelles (2011) discuss in their work,

people immigrating to Canada and the United States are required to provide extensive health

information and are often not "let in" on the basis of disability. Erevelles argues that disabled and

racialized bodies are prevented from living in particular countries—or even living at all—through

eugenic and immigration practices, which bear a haunting similarity to each other in that both

practices are aimed at forcefully preventing disabled and racialized people to live in "our" midst

(Erevelles, 2011, p. 129). These two resembling and entangled practices cast disabled people,

racialized people, and disabled racialized people as "unfit bodies" and "unworthy citizens" through

"protective" policies of nation-building, such as forced sterilization, rigid immigration screening

procedures that include lengthy personal health histories and police checks, institutionalization and

imprisonment, and even genocide (Erevelles, 2011; Snyder & Mitchell, 2003). Racist immigration

practices and ableist eugenic practices could be articulated as separately targeting racialized and

disabled people, however as Erevelles' analysis shows, they are indeed entangled manifestations of

the pervasive and circulating production of the meaning of disabled, racialized, and disabled

racialized bodies as undesirable citizens and thusly disposable (2011).

Tangled Rivers

As I have just described, disabled, racialized, and disabled racialized people live under

constant threat of being excluded, violated, and eliminated when negotiating the normative

terrain or "terrains of domination" (McKittrick, 2006, p. xiv). Ableism and racism is pervasive.

Because we cannot transcend the sphere of normalcy—and thus cannot avoid ableism and

racism—we must "unwork" the places and spaces we find ourselves in (Walcott, 2008). Walcott

writes that "unworking" is a process of interrogating, as a way of undoing, the power structures

of social life in order to reveal its sutures and violently instituted forms and norms (2003, p. 22).

My research proposes that one way to "unwork" normative space for the purposes of finding a

way to live in what promises to be inhospitable terrain is through enacting community, and as is

the specific focus of my research on crip community. Enacting crip community by creating

spaces, places, events, as well as unstructured moments of being together, in which disability is

welcomed rather than excluded or feared, is an act of "unworking" because it reveals just how

inaccessible, inhospitable, and even dangerous the "normative terrain" is. More than this, crip

community provides disabled people and our allies "safety in an insecure world" (Bauman, 2002,

pp. 1–2).

Positing how crip community "unworks" (Walcott, 2003, p. 22) the "normative terrain"

(McKittrick, 2006) requires us to think about the relationship between geographic space and

disability. We can think about this relationship in a few ways: We can think about how

inaccessible most geographies are and how this indicates that disabled people are not desired, or

even expected, participants in everyday life. We can also think about how disability is produced

in and by certain geographic spaces, such as special education classrooms and psychiatric

institutions, a relationship I will discuss later in this paper. But I want to begin exploring this

relationship by thinking about how certain geographic spaces produce disability. This

exploration centers on that which inspired it, the following monologue performed in a Sins

Invalid[5] show by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha in 2009. Here is a transcript of that

monologue:

> When I was a little girl growing up in the rustbelt town of Worcester, Massachusetts, the
>
> river that flowed through out town was the Blackstone. But it was more of a myth than a
>
> river. It was a river that no one had ever seen. The people would come to Worcester to
>
> work in shoe factories and textiles, in leather and electronics. We knew the Blackstone
>
> because her water pushed the wheels of the mills that made money for the bosses—the
>
> ones who brought us here. But in the late 70s, the city fathers decided to put the river into
>
> a culvert and she turned into a myth, a myth of a pretty woman who turned into a
>
> monster. The Blackstone had been put to work, like our working class women's bodies.
>
> Worked and worked, to make someone else money… 'til she was worked to rags… thin
>
> and worn through… thrown away when she was too dirty for anyone to want to touch.
>
> Entombed in cement, she slowly filled up with poison from all those dyes, all that
>
> cement, all those computer chips rinsed in acid. She flowed under the city, she who'd
>
> caused the city to come to be. And we never saw her sweet hips, or felt her cum rushing
>
> green and willowy through our beautiful, fucked up, rustbelt, empty lot, urban wild
>
> paradise. All we knew was that she was filthy and sick, locked away, where no one
>
> would ever see or touch her.

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[5] Sins Invalid is a performance group working out of San Francisco, California. According to their artist statement, Sins Invalid "incubates and celebrates artists with disabilities, centralizing artists of colour and queer and gender-variant artists as communities who have been historically marginalized" (Sins Invalid, 2009).

In 1983, my mother could recite the 33 cancer-causing compounds found in

Worcester water. The city fathers said the water was fresh, but all we knew was you

could smell the chemicals thicker than a pool before you even turned on the tap. Working

class folks and lower middle class ones, like my mama, they bought bottled water, 29

cents on special, just for the town. And we drank, and drank, hoping to survive, not

forever scarred. It worked, and it didn't. There is only so much bottled water can really

do. When the wind blew from Norton's ceramic abrasive tile plant, you wanted to puke at

my school, 500 yards away. Every year, another teacher came down with alopecia.

Another teacher got breast or colon cancer. I was nineteen when my mother was

diagnosed with stage four ovarian cancer. Tentacles touching her uterus and intestines,

blooming, like algae in a polluted lake. The first girl I ever kissed grew up in Leicester,

where there was a little uranium leak in the 80s. She found out she had invasive cervical

cancer at 28, in her first Pap smear in 10 uninsured years.

And throughout it all, the fingers of mothers and fathers, touching and whisky and

silence and rage passed down. All our bodies sick and fucked up for no good reason…

just some dumb stories that we made up that no one wanted to hear. (Crip Justice, 2010)

Drinking bad water caused an abundance of disability to arise in Piepzna-Samarasinha's

town: colon cancer, breast cancer, alopecia; Piepzna-Samarasinha herself became disabled. Her

mother got cancer because of contact with this water. They did not "survive" but were instead

"forever scarred" (Crip Justice, 2010). Indeed, the people of Worcester were, to use Piepzna-

Samarasinha's words, "sick and fucked up for no good reason" (Crip Justice, 2010). Watching

this monologue, I was struck by disgrace. It is disgraceful, shameful, and abhorrent that the

people of an industrial town could be understood as disposable and, as a result, their land, as well

are their bodies, be so uncared for. Hearing Piepzna-Samarasinha's monologue, I also struggled.

My mind struggled not to make the leap that would land me into thinking that the sickness and

disability that resulted from such gross neglect was disgraceful too. This is not a comfortable

place in which to land; for me, disability is always prideful even when it rubs shame. For me,

disability is certainly not the experience of being "sick and fucked up for no good reason" (Crip

Justice, 2010). But this is how it was represented in this monologue, and I understand how it

could be framed as such. Touching bad water that the government will not clean up is an instance

of environmental racism; it is not a "good reason" to become disabled and sick. It may be,

indeed, "fucked up." And my disability politic, which understands disability as desired life, a

communal bind, and creative inspiration, tells me that there is a possibility that a disability that

arose from this disgraceful situation is not, itself, a disgrace. This story, although it may be

uncomfortable, is one we should "want to hear."

I wanted to begin this discussion with my immediate personal reflections on this clip and

how disability "shapes" and was "shaped by" this clip, following Rosemarie Garland-Thomson

(2007, pp. 113–114). I now extend my reflection on how this "fresh and feisty" disability story,

again following Garland-Thomson (2007, pp. 113–114), may provide new shape for our

movement and how it may serve as an entry point into the discussion of the entanglement of

geography and humanness. I take particular interest in what I refer to as "different stories of

difference" because I believe that through these stories we enact new meanings of disability,

following Titchkosky (2008, p. 17). This story by Piepzna-Samarasinha is a different story of

difference. It is, perhaps, a different story of disability than I am used to, or even comfortable

with. Piepzna-Samarasinha's story of difference, however, is different in the way that it dwells in

the details of what causes disability; details that I rarely, if ever, attend to. Typically in the DRM, we tend not to spend much time thinking about the cause of disability because this usually points us to "biology gone wrong," and, through this pointing, we arrive at an understanding of disability as individually located, with a static, singular meaning as a problem in need of a solution. In this arrangement, disability is figured as asocial and apolitical. These conceptions are antagonistic to the way the DRM imagines disability, as a social phenomenon which emerges between us, with shifting meaning, a legitimate way of life and, indeed, very political. However, Piepzna-Samarasinha's pointing to the cause of disability—environmental injury *caused by* environmental racism—tells a different story… we arrive at a different place. She is pointing at a material cause—the land, rather than biology—but in further pointing to environmental racism, she is still positing the 'cause' or genesis of disability to be political. In this way, disability remains not a "thing" but a socio-political "phenomenon," not in need of solution (disability, not environmental racism) but in need of attention.

Piepzna-Samarasinha exemplifies that just as the cause of her disability is political, so too is her disabled embodiment. She is a part of Sins Invalid, which is a performance group working out of San Francisco, California. According to their artist statement, Sins Invalid "incubates and celebrates artists with disabilities, centralizing artists of colour and queer and gender-variant artists as communities who have been historically marginalized" (Sins Invalid, 2009). Again from their statement, Sins Invalid "is committed to social and economic justice for all people with disabilities—in lockdowns, in shelters, on the streets, visibly disabled, invisibly disabled, sensory minority, environmentally injured, psychiatric survivors—moving beyond individual legal rights to collective human rights" (Sins Invalid, 2009). We cannot be sure how Piepzna-Samarasinha relates to her disability caused by environmental injury, in part because this is

likely a shifting relation, but we can confidently guess by her involvement in Sins Invalid,

together with the group's statement, part of which I just cited, that despite of the disgraceful

neglect caused by environmental racism, there is a rich possibility to politically mobilize and

"communify" (Mercer, 1994) around a disability that results from shameful circumstances, in

this case, environmental racism. Here, perhaps, pride rubs disgrace.

Piepzna-Samarasinha's monologue also reveals the production of disability as being

tightly bound up in the production of land: land makes disability. Racialized people were placed

on this particular land (a poor, industrial town) because of their racialization and poverty.

Environmental racism caused the land (water) to be unhealthy. In this way, the land (geography)

allowed for disability… it ushered disability in. And again, this is political. The US government

did not bother to, or actively decided not to, clean up the water of the poor, racialized town of

Worcester, Mass. This caused the Blackstone River, which flowed underneath the town, to turn

from the "myth of a pretty lady" into a "monster," "filthy and sick," "hidden away" (2009). We

can easily suspect that the dirty water was not attended to because the people drinking the water

out of the Blackstone River were not desirable citizens; they were poor and racialized. This was

the kind of town, or land, that the government did not invest in.

The Entanglement of Humanness and Geography

To extend a discussion that was opened up by Piepzna-Samarasinha's story, I turn to

McKittrick's work, which suggests that, "geography, the material world, is infused with

sensations and distinct ways of knowing" and, therefore it must follow that the way we "know"

certain geographies has much to do with the way we understand the bodies that occupy or are

contained by these spaces" (2006, ix). In many analogous, overlapping, and entangled ways,

geography contributes to the meaning of race and disability and racialized and disabled people

contribute to the meaning of certain spaces as well. For example, in Jijian Voronka's article

"Spacing mad degeneracy at the Queen Street site" (2008), she explores how, by producing the

space of the institution (in this case, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health's Queen Street

location in Toronto), as a "mad" space, the people contained in this space become "mad." Such

an entwined production of space (a "geographic container," following McKittrick) and people

("contained," again following McKittrick) has a history. In his book *Remembrance of Patients*

Past (2000), Geoffrey Reaume explains how, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in this exact

site, then known as the Toronto Hospital for the Insane, patients/inmates were put on display

behind the patient-built wall, which made the institution a literal, but not entirely impenetrable,

container (Reaume, 2000). This happened on Sunday afternoons so that families visiting the

Toronto Exhibition—with its "freak shows" containing disabled, racialized, and disabled

racialized bodies—could venture up to the hospital to see more "freaks" on display (Reaume,

2000). The production of the Queen Street site, then and now, as a space of what Voronka terms

"mad degeneracy," (2006) which produced inmates as "mad," served and still serves the social

function of assuring those of us on the outside that we are not "mad;" we are normal. A more

specific and personal example of this can be found in Erick Fabris' book *Tranquil Prisons*

(2011) in which he describes experiences in which being in the institution as a mental patient

caused his quiet and gentle requests to sound disruptive and dangerous.

In her work McKittrick discusses the slave ship—a geographic symbol of the slave trade,

one the first instances of diaspora travel, that is travel without pleasure or choice (McKittrick,

2009)—which "contained" understandings of black humanity, and thereby understanding of the

struggle for black liberation during the time of slavery, at the same time as it is contained black

bodies (McKittrick, 2006). In this way the geography of the slave ship "contained and

regulated," as it hid, black humanity naturalizing the understanding that those inside, bound by

the walls, were neither "seeable [sic] nor liberated subjects" (2006, p. x).

These stories, along with Piepzna-Samarasinha's and many more, open up space to

consider that the way that bodies are *materially* produced is tightly entangled with how bodies

are *discursively* produced. And this tangle is tangled up in the knot of how the meaning of

humanness and geography are produced. The people of Worcester, Mass. are not "naturally"

poor and its land is not "naturally" hazardous; this is, indeed, a production. And this production

involves more than just an industry and a river with dirty water in the town; this production

requires the people who occupy this town, an occupation structured on the displacement of

Native people, to be understood as disposable, which aboriginal, diaspora, racialized, disabled

and poor people are. The people in Worcester were understood as disposable, which produced

the town as one that was below the radar of governmental attention and responsibility. Thus, the

town—the geography, the land, the water, the air—became disposable too. This understanding,

as I've said, produces disability, discursively and materially… And the knotting continues…

Turning Toward Debility

Before following up on this paper's promise, the promise of community, I turn to Puar

and her articulation of "debility." In her recent article, "The cost of getting better" (2011), Puar

makes an important intervention into disability studies. I want to take Puar up on her call for the

DRM to think about the way that we produce disability and disability identity within our

scholarly and activist movement in order to consider who lives in the margins of what she calls

the "normative idea" of who is disabled that circulate in our movement (2011). While I do agree

that our movement imagines disability in particular ways, as I will argue, I also believe that such

a "scopic view" (de Certeau, 1984/2007), and its productive deception (an interesting shift to the

"sight as knowledge" trope) is a necessary effect of any collectivizing activity, such as

movement making and community building. As such, this scopicism is not unique to disability

studies; all identity-based movements and disciplines operate with an imagined understanding of

who their collective is. They must, whether or not they admit to it. So, again, I take up Puar's

necessary challenge in order to show the dynamism of our movement rather than its faults.

Writing in the American context, Puar argues that Dan Savage's anti-bullying campaign,

"It Gets Better," which emerged as a response to the increasing number of queer youth suicides

in America in 2011, should not be read as purely a sympathetic and benevolent action (and we in

the disability movement have always approached sympathy and benevolence with caution). Puar

frames her intervention as "an attempt to go beyond a critique of the queer neoliberalism

embedded in the tendentious mythologizing that 'it gets better' by confronting not only the

debilitating aspects of neoliberalism but, more trenchantly, the economics of debility" (2011, p.

149).

In America, with its fiercely imbedded medical industrial complex, "debility" for Puar is

incurred as the cost of "getting better," or perhaps more precisely, the debt incurred while

"getting better." Puar makes the case that in the US where personal debt incurred by medical

expenses is the number one reason for filing for bankruptcy, debility pays, and it pays well

(2011, p. 149). Experiencing "slow deaths"— the "debilitating ongoingness of structural

inequality and suffering," following Lauren Berlant—and "getting better," are, Puar argues,

financially essential. Suicides, then, are financially injurious (2011, p. 149). "Getting better,"

then, may be more about sustaining the neo-liberal economy than sustaining queer life. Debility,

then, phrased differently, is a cost of neoliberalism. People paying into "getting better" or

experiencing "slow death" (Berlant in Puar, 2011, p. 149) because they cannot afford to "get

better" are debilitated rather than disabled, in Puar's framing of debility.

Puar praises disability studies for understanding disability as non-normativity that needs

to be depathologized as well as disability activism for seeking to move beyond access issues

foregrounded by the Americans with Disabilities Act (2011, p. 153). However, she challenges

the way that our movement upholds the "binarized production of disabled versus non-disabled

bodies" (2011, p. 153). Such a distinction, Puar argues, elides bodies and narratives of those

bodies which are not easily included within our movement's imagination of disability, but also

cannot be categorized as non-disabled —debilitated bodies. More than this, Puar is arguing, such

a binary positions disability as a minority among a non-disabled majority, neglecting entire

working-poor and working-class communities of colour, in which people who are impaired by

workplace injuries, by environmental racism, by not being able to afford the cost of recovering

from illnesses (2011, p. 153), as well as colonized counties in which the majority of the

population are impaired or live with trauma as a result of war. Entire towns of debilitated people

are dying "slow deaths" (Berlant in Puar, 2011, p. 149) because they cannot afford to pay to "get

better"—towns like Worcester, Mass., First Nations communities in which Aboriginal people are

3 to 5 times more likely than non-Aboriginal people to have diabetes, which is caused by a lack

of access to nutritious food and good health care, which means that more and more Aboriginal

people experience the pain, mobility and sight impairments associated with diabetes (Health

Canada, 2011), farming communities across the globe whose populations may be more likely to

contract cancers, such as Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma, because of exposure to pesticides (Chiu &

Blair, 2009; Lee et al, 2004; Miller, 1999). Puar is arguing that we, the DRM, cannot afford not

to pay attention to this form of "liberal eugenics" (2011, 154). As uncomfortable as it may be,

and I would suggest that this is extremely uncomfortable, at least for me (who thought I had my disability politics all sorted out), Puar is demanding that we re-think disability in terms of precarious populations, especially as the boundaries of what constitutes "capacity," and therefore viable life, are becoming narrower and narrower (2011, p. 154). Debility, then, is on the rise, and impaired people may no longer occupy minority status. I take Puar's call and assert that the disability movement, for all we have done and can do, must attend to debility.

Puar's Turn to Disability Studies

What I find most fascinating about Puar's call for disability studies to consider debility is twofold and related. Firstly, Puar turned to disability studies when she could have turned elsewhere. Labour rights, critical race theory, and Marxist feminism would all have been appropriate fields in which to position her call. But Puar turned to disability studies. Secondly, Puar is giving us a new word, "debility." Puar's distinction between "disability" and "debility" could be due to her unfamiliarity with disability, particularly with the social model. And we, disability studies, could answer back that the social model has been theorizing the socio-structural ways that our world disables us since the 1980s; what Puar is calling "debility" is already well within our scope. However, I would like to argue that what is interesting about this lexical choice is that it leaves our current understanding of "disability" untouched. Puar could have articulated her argument in a way that demanded that we broaden our operative definition of disability to include neo-liberal injuries… but she did not. I would argue that these decisions—turning to disability studies and leaving "disability" as is—is indicative of the respect Puar has for our field as she offers us this necessary challenge. Recall her praising of our field for disrupting normativity for political, justice-oriented ends (2011, p. 153). Such a recognition

positions our movement as being already in line with the radical, normativity-disruptive work

that Puar is calling for and, thusly, our movement is an ideal place to take up debility.[6] Perhaps

Puar is not chiding our movement, as she could do and may be interpreted as doing, but, rather,

she is turning to disability studies and the DRM because she is recognizing that we are unique in

our approach and effective in our work, perhaps, in part, for our unique attention to the

production of normalcy and disruption of its standard, which is necessary for, and an effect of,

rethinking debility. This is not to say that Puar is not issuing a challenge to our movement and

our discipline; her articulation of debility is a necessary intervention that we need to attend to.

Our movement has a long way to go in order to effectively respond to this challenge. But the

challenge—to rethink disability and impairment in order to disrupt how both are normatively

constituted—is well within our movement's politic. In fact, rethinking normalcy is what a

disability politic engenders.[7]

I also think that Puar's challenge is more sophisticated than simply asking disability

studies to consider materiality, as could easily be another interpretation of her intervention. Her

article and her past work demonstrates that she theorizes these two realms in an entangled

configuration. In this article, Puar is interested in the discursive and material conditions from

which gay youth suicides arise and give rise to. She writes that she is interested in the *naming* of

"gay youth suicide" (my emphasis) and that she is interested in the discourses around this

cultural phenomenon, particularly in relation to the binarization of bodily capacity and bodily

debility (2011, p. 149). Further along in the article when she is engaging Nikolas Rose's

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[6] Puar published this piece in *GLQ*, a queer studies journal, but she issued the challenge of taking up debility to disability studies.

[7] In their introduction to *Re-thinking normalcy: A disability studies reader* (2010), Titchkosky and Michalko articulate disrupting normalcy as one of the key features of disability studies. Their work and others are demonstrative of this articulation. Disrupting normalcy requires us first to attend to it. Such attention and disruption is generative for lots of area studies disciplines, such as critical race theory and queer theory.

assertion that "depression will be the number one disability in the United States and the U.K.

within the next ten years," Puar suggests that this expansion will not occur through the

interpellation of depressed subjects, but, rather, by an increased categorical definition of what

depression is (2011, p. 156). This observation contributes to her claim that debility is on the rise,

which is indicative of the medical-industrial complex's narrowing the category of normal in

effort to widen the margins of who is pathologically not normal, of which debility is a part

(2011, p. 156). For, again, the medical-industrial complex, a key neo-liberal feature of the US,

depends upon the profitability of debility (Puar, 2012, p. 156). Here, too, to take up Puar's

analysis of disability and debility requires us to consider materiality and discourse as entangled

within the clarification of bodily capacity and debility.

On top of how Puar's work articulates these two realms, her theorization of debility

requires us to take up discourse and materiality as inseparable. Debility, she writes, is the

ongoingness of structural inequality and suffering (2011, p. 149). Debility comes at the cost of

neoliberal discourses' heightened demands for bodily capacity, which mark out certain

populations as those to experience the conditional causes of debilitation (2011, p, 149). By this

articulation, Piepzna-Samarasinha's town could easily be articulated as debilitated: neoliberal

conditions and ideologies that regulate that federal funding should not be dispersed evenly but

that the government should provide for productive (desirable, rich) citizens and neglect

unproductive citizens in the interest of national capital growth. The citizens of Worcester,

Massachusetts are discursively understood as disposable and thusly marked out as a population

to experience the conditions which cause debilitation. And they did, in the form of cancer,

alopecia, and other conditions. These debilities mark the ongoingness of structural inequalities,

the tie between discourse and materiality securely bound. Disability arose out of debility, as did

sickness, illness, and environmental injury. These are all differences that make a difference,

much like their racialized and classed differences which produced them in and as a disposable

population. And these differences are storied. Piepzna-Samarasinha stories her difference and the

debility that arose in her town as the experience of being "sick and fucked up for no good

reason" (Crip Justice, 2010), which may perhaps be the storying of debility. Perhaps, like Puar,

Piepzna-Samarasinha turned to the disability movement with her stories of debility; debility, the

experience of which is not exclusive to disability, brought her in.

As I have just suggested, disability studies and its politic is a productive place to turn for

its commitment to troubling normalcy, particularly when rethinking the bodily

capacity/incapacity (debility) divide. Disability studies, with its commitments to opening up to

different stories of difference, especially related to troubling understandings of unlivable lives

based on bodily, mental, and sensorial difference, is, I believe, open, ready, and already engaging

the challenge of thinking through debility that Puar is posing to us (in a very considered way).

One way to open up to this challenge—and there are many—is to turn to community.

Specifically, we may open up to different stories of difference that may already be a part of us by

understanding that a scopic, totalizing view of our community—which may, to some extent, be

necessary for any form of collectivizing—tricks us into thinking that we "know" who we are,

and therefore who we are not.

The Promise of Community

Let me return to my earlier thoughts on the entanglement of humanness and geography.

Disabled and racialized people build community and engage in analogous, overlapping, and

entangled "communifying practices" (Mercer, 1994, p. 10) in order to work out new ways of

belonging and meaning together in the midst of an inhospitable geography which does not desire

us, or sometimes even recognize us, as citizens. Creating and participating in community offers

us ways to re-inscribe the land. Community occurs in the normative terrain, for it cannot possibly

transcend it. So, then, one possible way of attending to my over-arching question—how do we

open up to different stories of difference that may be troubling to our movement—a question

that, for me, emerged when I began to think about the entanglement of disability and geography,

may in fact lie in space: The space of community.

       As I suggest that turning to community is a way to open up space for "different stories of

difference," I will first give a little background of how "community" is taken up by the DRM.

Our movement, like most movements, refers to "community" a lot: This year alone will find

special issues of journals and conference themes relating to disability community; community is

an oft-discussed topic on blogs and message boards discussions; in disability autobiographies

and memoirs, disabled people often credit "the community" with helping them discover

disability pride, relate to their disability as an embodied identity, meet other disabled comrades,

become political. The disability community is also heavily critiqued and rightly so. People who

imagine themselves to be part of the disability community often call attention to who is being

excluded from community.

       The articulations, iterations, adorations and critiques of disability community, all have

one thing in common, as far as I can tell: they all imagine disability community to be a "thing"—

a static "thing;" a knowable "thing;" a "thing" that is inclusive to some and exclusive to others

and we, the included, can "know" who is being excluded. While I certainty do not mean to imply

that I think that excluding people from our movement is allowable in any way, I do want to

consider that, perhaps, our figuration of "community" as a taken-for-granted static "thing" which

is inclusive and exclusive may not be the most useful framework because it could cause us to

miss ways that crip community is already being enacted. I propose that as we think about crip

community, its possibilities and promises, we may need to "crip" community. For this, I use crip

as a verb: To crip is to open up desire for what disability disrupts (Fritsch, 2012). "Cripping" is a

process of "unworking" and remaking meaning that can be applied in any area of critical work

(Walcott, 2008, p. 23). Although it need not be disability specific, it is an example of the work

that disability does, or following Rod Michalko (1998), it is demonstrative of the way disability

can teach. Cripping community—a productive project as much as it is destructive—requires us to

imagine that although our community is enacted in structured ways, such as mad pride parades

and disability rights marches, disability studies classrooms, protests, conferences, dances and so

on, and is structured by material and historical process along with a tremendous amount of work

and care, crip community also occurs in unstructured communal enactments; enactments that

may not be recordable, and therefore may not be knowable, by all.

Cripping our understanding of crip community, then, requires us to relinquish the idea

that ours is a community that has a knowable whole. I think there are already stories being told,

and our community is being worked and reworked, in ways that are not apparent, for a totalizing,

"scopic," understanding of our community is not possible (de Certeau, 1984/2007). Stories of

being "sick and fucked up for no good reason" that lead to political identity and action (Crip

Justice, 2010); stories of being contained as mad and seeking mad community both inside and

outside of the institution which resist psychiatric violence through what Fabris calls "mad polity"

(2011); stories of disability as the result of gun violence, following Ralph (forthcoming), stories

of debility (Puar, 2011). These stories are already being told in our movement and therefore they

are "shaping" who "we" are (Garland-Thomson, 2007). Stories like the ones Sins Invalid tells of

environmental injury, of the entanglement of race and physical disability in instances of police brutality,[8] of psychiatric survivorship; stories where debility and disability are financially injurious; stories of gang violence which narrate disability as a pointless effect of pointless gun violence; stories of disability emerging from natural disasters in the global South and the global North because aid did not come, or came too late, as Erevelles (2011), and McRuer (2010) note.

I am suggesting then that as we move forward, and we must—disability and debility have violent, deadly implications—we remember that we cannot obtain a scopic understanding of our movement and that different stories of difference are shaping "us" in unknowable ways. And given that we will never know who "we" are, we must proceed carefully. While I do not have any conclusive thoughts on how we can keep going with our movement's work without knowing who "we" are, I do have a few suggestions: We might be careful with how we claim humanness, or a disabled vitality, as a valuable life. When we articulate our legitimacy by asserting our capacity to work and consume, or by distancing ourselves from articulations of disability as a cost, as associated with poor health, or as in other ways injurious, such assertions may come with a cost to others, *our* others.

The promise of crip community might lie in understandings of community not as static but fleeting and therefore being enacted in unknowable ways. I propose that if we acknowledge that our movement may have normative expectations of how disability and debility is experienced and storied, then we may find that the challenge is not to make space for "different stories of difference" to be told, because they are already *being* told. What is required is for us to attend to how we are being shaped by the "different stories of difference," new and old, that are already a part of our movement and a part of us.

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[8] For example, Leroy Moore's upcoming documentary, *Where is Hope?* which examines how race, gender, and disability are factors in instances of police brutality (CAPB San Diego, 2013).

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