

De-colonizing Disability Theory I – Crippling Development
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Is there a Russian Crip Public? On (Digital) Space, Traveling Theory, and Disability as Radical Alterity

A critical approach to post-Soviet cultural studies requires a departure from teleological models of progress or transition that throughout the 1990s imagined Russia as becoming more and more "like" the West. At the same time, critical theorists in the post-Soviet region have reached for theoretical terminology and short-hands deployed in anglophone scholarship - gender, queer, disability studies. As an ethnographer recording and interpreting the experiences of Russians with disabilities in the city of Petrozavodsk, whose own approach to disability studies and to the research process is informed by queer theory and postcolonial theory, I have struggled with when and if it is appropriate to deploy the concept "crip" as it has been developed in recent anglophone scholarship by Robert McRuer and others.

Working through this problem, I propose, requires three moves. First, to determine which components of cripness, as imagined in anglophone scholarship and as such in the western context, are legible to Russians themselves. Second, to pay attention to spaces in which Russians with disabilities are creating counter-narratives, counter-publics, critical consciousness, and spaces for radical alterity based on non-normative bodies. And third, to think reflexively about what it means as a western scholar to move categories of thought from west to east.

In order to do so, I draw on ethnographic examples from observation and interviews with adults living with cerebral palsy and/or traumatic injuries in Petrozavodsk, Russia conducted in 2012-2013. I also engage examples from public culture and media, including the work of Russian comedian Sergei Kutergin, the films of Vladimir Rudak, and the public shaming of queer activists. Ultimately, this presentation does not seek to "define" a "russian crip" perspective, or to argue against the use of theory across contexts, but to contrapose the western queer-crip perspective with iterations of Russian disabled counter-publics, so as to create new openings through productive friction. At the heart of this intellectual trajectory is a question about how the pathologization and prohibition of certain sexualities, and the pathologization and segregation of non-normative bodies, function as mutually reinforcing or co-productive systems of domination, even across cultural difference.