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2. 'LET ME BE YOUR STIMY TOY': FASHIONING DISABILITY, CRIPPING FASHION

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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers how previously marginalised corporealities get incorporated into the visual mainstream and asks how – and if – fashion can help to disrupt the canons of bodily normalcy. It sets out a theoretical framework for analysing images of disability by outlining the four dominant strategies for representing disabled and other non-normative bodies in visual culture: 'enfreakment' (Garland-Thomson 1998); 'mainstreaming', a strategy that invites the viewer to negate and disregard the bodily difference (Smith 2006); 'disability aesthetics' (Siebers 2010); and 'crip aesthetics'. It then discusses recent representations of disabled bodies in fashion and lifestyle media that perform or challenge these strategies, focusing on images of amputee performer and model Viktoria Modesta, amputee war veteran and model Noah Galloway, model Melanie Gaydos as shot by photographer Tim Walker and the fashion performances organised by non-binary queer and disabled Filipinx artist and designer Sky Cubacub. I argue that the latter projects offer alternative and radical ways of representing disability within a fashion context and celebrate visible difference as a source of creative potential, rather than attempting to normalise or fetishise it, thus 'cripping' fashion.

Keywords: disability, crip, queercrip, enfreakment, inclusive fashion

Introduction

A house beat is playing at full volume, creating a club-like atmosphere. A model makes her entrance. She is wearing a joyous, bright outfit: a shimmering turquoise and purple bodysuit with a pattern reminiscent of fish scales, paired with face glitter, large hoop earrings and over-the-knee boots. She has a noticeable limp and is using a cane that matches her outfit, which she holds in her left hand; her other arm is supported by a sling of the same colour and material. As she slowly makes her way across the stage, to join other models – some slim, some fat, some in wheelchairs, some with rollators, one with a morningstar weapon made of soft

materials – in shocking pinks, safety yellows and neon greens dancing to the beat, the vocals on the accompanying track enunciate her appearance and outfit:

> *Queercrip with a bad limp*
> *Nonbinary femme (she/her)*
> *Tall, skinny, long curly hair*
> *Walking cane slip cover*
> *Chainmaille bracelet, vibrant tats*
> *(Makeup that looks like tats)*
> *Blue holographic scales on black*
> *Sexy one piece with a low back*
> *Dark mermaid, leather harness*
> *Delicious, disabled*
> *We must confess*
> *Mixed, Italian, Latinx,*
> *Blues purples oh joy oh yes (*https://vimeo.com/265589004 (Accessed 23 August 2021))

The above was a brief description of a scene in a performance by Chicago-based art and fashion project Radical Visibility Collective featuring clothing by Rebirth Garments. It is also one of the slowly growing number of instances where disabled bodies are seen in a fashion context. Over the last decade, fashion weeks, fashion magazines and fashion advertising have been slowly incorporating previously marginalised corporealities. The increasing visibility, within fashion, of racialised, trans, fat and, to a lesser extent, disabled bodies had been long overdue and was enabled and encouraged by the recent conversations about diversity and inclusivity (Barry 2019, Burton and Melkumova-Reynolds 2019). A few recent examples of disability representation in fashion include the successes of visibly disabled models, such as Jillian Mercado, Mama Cāx, Aaron Philip, Ellie Goldstein, Viktoria Modesta and many others. Cultural intermediaries facilitating such representations and their dissemination include recently formed model agencies that represent people 'with disabilities or non-normative appearances' (Zebedee Management 2021) or 'who belong to social context not included in fashion system like disability, poor conditions, prisons, violence and abuses [sic]' (Iulia Barton 2021), such as Zebedee Management in the UK and the US and Iulia Barton in Italy; campaigns and activist organisations, such as Models of Diversity; trade associations and organisations, such as Open Style Lab and Inclusive Fashion & Design Collective; individual activists, such

as Sinéad Bourke and Keah Brown; and fashion brands creating accessible collections, such as Tommy Hilfiger, Erdem and JCPenney, among others.

In short, fashion appears to have, at long last, noticed and acknowledged disability and allowed the disabled body to enter its imaginaries. However, the conditions of such entry are often contentious. While the (relative) proliferation of disabled bodies in fashion contexts is a welcome development, it is quite rare for these representations to challenge, disrupt or transcend ableist logics entrenched in visual culture. More often, they incorporate disabled bodies into the visual mainstream by negating, disavowing or fetishising disabilities. In fashion imagery, this is commonly done by reframing what would previously have been conceived of as medical needs as consumer choices, thus presenting the disabled body, through a 'prosthetic aesthetic' (Tamari 2017), as an ultimate consumer body (Burton and Melkumova-Reynolds 2019); by portraying disabled people as super-able cyborgean survivors (Melkumova-Reynolds 2019; Tamari 2017); or else by constructing the disabled body in ways that encourage the viewer to disregard its disability altogether (Smith 2006), effectively making it 'pass' as non-disabled.

The aim of this chapter is to provide a framework for thinking disabled bodies in the context of fashion imagery. By tracing the genealogies and meanings of modes of representation deployed to incorporate disability into fashion's visuality, it opens up a conversation about how – and if – fashion can help to disrupt the canons of bodily normalcy. The chapter will begin by outlining the key ideas of a field of study that underpins my approach: disability studies. It will then move on to unpick three dominant strategies for representing disabled and other non-normative bodies in visual culture, and examine examples of such strategies in fashion: 'enfreakment' (Garland-Thomson 1996), a deliberate foregrounding of bodily deviance; mainstreaming, a strategy that invites the viewer to negate and disregard the bodily difference; and 'disability aesthetics' (Siebers 2010), a different kind of gaze predicated on exploring alternative modes of embodiment as a source of aesthetic potential. Finally, I will propose a fourth mode of representation that foregrounds disability as a lived experience and identity, 'crip aesthetics', and analyse the work of a fashion project that embodies this approach.

From disability studies to crip theory

The framework of this chapter borrows from disability studies, an interdisciplinary field of enquiry and activism that emerged on the back of the 1970s disability rights movement. Its key

premise is that disability is not an inherent physical condition but rather a result of societal attitudes towards impairment; that 'the problem of disability is located in inaccessible buildings, discriminatory attitudes, and ideological systems that attribute normalcy and deviance to particular minds and bodies' (Kafer 2013: 5). This approach is known as 'the social model', as opposed to the 'medical model' that believes disability to reside in the biological body and 'frames atypical bodies and minds as deviant, pathological, and defective, best understood and addressed in medical terms' (Ibid.).

Drawing on Foucault's work on the history of medicine (2002, 2003, 2005), disability scholars see the reductionist medical model as being a result of the Industrial Revolution, when members of society came to be regarded, first and foremost, as workers (Richardson 2010: 170). While the medical model focuses on treating, through doctoral intervention, the physical condition, the social model calls instead for a change in the sociopolitical predicaments that restrict the lives of disabled people, from the built environment to the cultural attitudes towards impairment. Stemming from social constructionist thinking, this approach sometimes distinguishes between 'impairment', which is a biological trait, from 'disability': '[t]he former is individual and private, the latter is structural and public. While doctors and professions allied to medicine seek to remedy impairment, the real priority is to accept impairment and to remove disability' (Shakespeare 2006: 197).

This distinction, and the social model itself, however, have been critiqued by disability scholars and activists over the last two decades, for perpetuating the binary logic of 'nature versus culture' and for negating the body itself – that is, glossing over the physical, embodied realities of disablement. New paradigms rooted in new materialism (Mitchell, Antebi and Snyder 2019) and queer phenomenology (Ahmed 2006) have begun to emerge which call for considering the agential capacities of both the material and the discursive aspects of disability. This is where a more recent direction of disability studies – crip theory – comes to hand.

Crip theory builds on queer theory in many respects. The word 'crip' is an abbreviation of 'cripple' which used to be a term of verbal abuse, just like 'queer' once was. Furthermore, its framework is largely rooted in Judith Butler's (1990) concept of performativity: crip identity, like gender in Butler's work, is seen to emerge through the iterative, performative processes enshrined in culture. In this paradigm, one does not become crip because one loses a limb; rather, this identity iterates as one engages in particular interactions with the world – both the social and the object world – on a daily basis. This identity is constituted as one carries around certain signifiers of disability, such as a cane or a wheelchair, and encounters particular reactions from non-disabled people – some of whom may exhibit pity, others

compassion, and others yet, repulsion. As Peers and Eales put it, '[t]he term "crip" refers not to someone who is disabled, but rather, to how some people *do* disability… Crip is thus, at its heart, a set of embodied practices or performances' (2017: 106, emphasis added).

Crip identity, then, is an iterative, processual and performative identity that emerges in repetitive acts and encounters with the world. It is rooted both in the materiality of the non-normative body – the sensory and emotional experiences of inhabiting such a body – and in the social and cultural realities of living in an ableist society, but it is much more than the sum of these parts. Most crucially, crip identity is not seen as problematic or needing intervention: while both the medical and the social model ultimately view disability as a lack that needs filling, crip theory regards crip as an already complete and legitimate way of being in the world that produces, and relies on, a particular 'body of knowledge' about society, space and embodiment itself (Siebers 2019); a body of knowledge that non-crips may want to learn from.

Crip theorists challenge what McRuer (2006) coined as 'compulsory able-bodiedness': the view of disability as inherently problematic and the general expectation that those with impaired bodies should wish to conform to able-bodied ideals and aspire to be 'cured'. Crip theory and crip creativity strive to imagine a 'newly configured public sphere where full participation is not contingent on an able body' (McRuer 2006: 30) and bring about paradigms that recognise the crip identity and culture as exactly that – forms of identity and culture. In a way, crip theory performs the labour of 'recast[ing] disability from a form of pathology to a form of ethnicity' (Garland-Thomson 1997: 6). But it does more than that: its aim is to conjure radically different futures, 'an elsewhere— and, perhaps, an "elsewhen"—in which disability is understood otherwise: as political, as valuable, as integral' (Kafer 2013: 3). Fashion and visual culture have the potential to play a pivotal role in such conjuring. However, they equally hold the power to conjure futures where disability is contained, disavowed or presented as a personal, rather than political, matter. In the rest of this chapter, I map out and critique the different modes of engaging with disability employed by fashion and visual culture: enfreakment, mainstreaming, disability aesthetics and crip aesthetics.

Enfreakment

The term 'enfreakment', first coined by David Hevey (1992) in relation to the photographic works of Diane Arbus, was perhaps most famously used by disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1996) to critique the strategies utilised by entrepreneurs who organised 'freak shows' in the Victorian era to amplify the differences of 'non-normative' bodies, such as that of the 'giant', the 'dwarf' and the 'armless and legless wonders'. Garland-Thomson's

elaboration of enfreakment draws on Robert Bogdan's (1988) study of freak shows where he postulates: '[B]eing a freak is not a personal matter, a physical condition that some people have... "Freak" is... a way of thinking about and presenting people' (Bogdan 1988: 3). Freakery, in Bogdan's account, emerges as a result of a particular mode of presentation – 'a standardised set of techniques, strategies and styles that showmen used to construct freaks' (Bogdan 1988: 104). To illustrate this, he draws on photographs from the famous freak shows staged by P. T. Barnum in the late 19th century and demonstrates how bodily difference was amplified through careful use of props, lighting and storytelling: 'Dwarfs were photographed in oversized chairs to appear smaller than life, and giants were shot in scaled-down chairs to appear larger. Fat people's garments were stuffed with rags to add to their size' (Bodgan 1988: 13).

Similarly, Garland-Thomson suggests that the '[f]reak discourse structured a cultural ritual that seized upon any deviation from the typical, embellishing and intensifying it to produce a human spectacle' (1996: 5). She defines enfreakment as 'a practice that elaborately foregrounds specific bodily eccentricities' (Garland-Thomson 1996: 10). It is important to note that enfreakment does not have to be denigrating or belittling; it can also be aimed at inspiring awe and wonder, but, either way, it ultimately invites the viewer to read the body in front of them as an absolute Other while reaffirming the viewers' own normalcy.

Many contemporary fashion images incorporating disabled bodies follow the logics of enfreakment. That is, they highlight the difference of disabled bodies through styling, lights, props and poses and invite the viewer to marvel at the extraordinary feats performed by these bodies and, often, to hail them as a triumph of technoscience (Smith 2006), or indeed fashion (Burton & Melkumova-Reynolds 2019). Imagery featuring amputee British model and performer Viktoria Modesta can be regarded as a particularly spectacular case of the enfreaking gaze.

Over the last ten years, Modesta has appeared in magazines including Bazaar, Vogue, Dazed & Confused and Numéro, walked the runway in several fashion shows and starred in a video produced by the British Fashion Council, as well as in an advertising film for Rolls Royce that she also art-directed. She possesses a stunning array of sleek, visually arresting prosthetic legs: one has built-in LED lights, another is incrusted in Swarovski crystals and rhinestones, and the most iconic one resembles a glossy black spike; in interviews, Modesta has referred to it as a 'giant stiletto heel' (Modesta 2015) and 'a new level of power dressing' (Burton and Melkumova-Reynolds 2019). Together with her stylist, Joanna Hir, Modesta creates signature futuristic looks featuring mainly black, white and silver garments, sculptural forms and

exaggerated geometric lines. Her prostheses play a pivotal role in her style, becoming the *pièce de resistance* of every outfit.

In her first music video, 'Prototype' (2014), the black spike leg is something of a main protagonist. The video starts with an ominous sound of steps and a thump, displaying a pair of legs – one of them the spike prosthesis – walking on, and then cracking, ice or glass. It ends with a scene starring the spike leg, too, in which Modesta's character, now a phantasmagorical puppet-nemesis, performs a surreal dance in which the prosthesis is used both as a leg and, as the soundscape suggests, a weapon. In the previous scene, a laser ray comes out of yet another prosthesis her character is wearing, terrifying her interrogators. In short, prostheses are consistently framed as sources of superpower in the video. The same logic is prevalent in fashion photographs of Modesta: her prosthesis is almost inevitably the punctum of the image, the essence holding the look, the pose and the mood together (Fig. 1).

In her numerous interviews, Modesta avoid being labelled disabled and prefers to call herself bionic. Indeed, there is hardly any suggestion of disability in her photographs and videos. Rather, she is portrayed as a superhero (this reference is made explicit in a scene in 'Prototype' where a little girl watches a retro style animation that features a hand-drawn cartoon version of Modesta as an avenger punishing wrongdoers by hitting them with her spike leg). The figure of the superhero who acquires superpowers after becoming disabled has, of course, a long cultural history: Iron Man and Superman both acquire their superpowers as a result of severe injuries. Fitting comfortably into this lineage of superhero images, Modesta's state-of-the-art prostheses and the 'prosthetic aesthetic' (Tamari 2017) of her representations conjure visions of a technoscience-led future predicated on human enhancement and perfectibility. Her fashionability can be regarded as one of her superpowers, too: as I have argued elsewhere (Burton and Melkumova-Reynolds 2019), her body is constructed as the ultimate fashion body. Her artificial legs match and amplify her outfits, 'fashioning' her body to an extent where her very corporeality becomes inextricably intertwined with fashion: she essentially has a stiletto heel for a leg. Her body is capable of merging with consumer items, establishing closer and more intimate relationships with them than an ordinary, non-disabled body.

Portrayals of Modesta picture her as exceptional and do not invite or encourage identification either from disabled or from non-disabled audiences. Garland-Thomson has argued that freak shows polarised the spectator and the performer, 'establish[ing] distance' (Garland-Thomson 1996: 10) between them and offering the viewers an 'assurance that they are not freaks' (Ibid.), thus drawing rigid boundaries between them and the enfreaked subject.

In a similar vein, the viewer encountering images of Modesta is enticed to marvel at her extraordinariness, not to ponder their shared humanity. One could argue that the 'aggrandising' (Garland-Thomson 1996) mode of presentation that paints Modesta's disability as a superability takes stigma away from impairment: thus, in an article on fashionable prostheses, fashion theorist Olga Vainshtein suggests that these items allows the viewer to 'retune their emotions in the face of otherness' (2012: 164). However, from the point of view of crip theory, this is not the case: these portrayals do nothing to celebrate disability identity (especially seeing as Modesta avoids this label) and disrupt the normative ideals of physical prowess. These representations enable us to look at disability – but only if it looks like superability, and/or fashionability.

Enfreakment is a dominant mode of disability representation in fashion: many images of disabled models follow the same logic of the 'supercrip' (Kafer 2013), constructing the disabled body as super-able or super-fashionable. This is hardly surprising: fashion thrives on the exceptional, on creating chasms between the spectator and the model, where the latter tends to be inaccessibly thin and wear clothes that are inaccessibly expensive. Other modes of portraying disability in the fashion context are currently emerging, as the following sections will show.

Mainstreaming

Another strategy for representing disability is that of mainstreaming. Contrary to enfreakment, it attempts to neutralise the difference of the disabled body and to portray it as a 'normal' body like any other: it might just happen to have a missing limb, or a hearing or visual impairment, but otherwise it's *just the same as you*. If enfreakment foregrounds, amplifies and fetishises difference, mainstreaming, on the contrary, prompts the viewer to ignore it.

Disability scholar Lennard Davis has written on how disablement can be written out of the discourse around certain bodies, despite their obvious impairment. He speaks about how the incompleteness of the Classical Greek statue Venus de Milo, and what he calls the 'mutilation' of ancient and pseudo-ancient statues, i.e., their missing limbs and heads, is overlooked by the art historians and aesthete who 'does not see the lack, the presence of an impairment, but rather mentally reforms the outline of the Venus so [as to]... return the damaged woman... to a pristine origin of wholeness. His is an act of reformation of the visual field, a sanitising of the disruption in perception' (Davis 1997: 57). Davis links this perceptual trick to wider patterns in 'the reception of disability – the way that the "normal" observer compensates for or defends against the presence of difference' (Davis 1997: 56). He likens the

mental restoration that onlookers perform on the image of a disabled body to a 'phantom limb' (Ibid.). Mainstreaming, then, is a visual strategy that encourages the viewer to disregard the impairment and endow the bodies in front of them with such phantom limbs; to gloss over the otherness and domesticate it, thus making it more palatable and the act of viewing, more comfortable and pleasant.

Like enfreakment, mainstreaming is an undercurrent of multiple fashion images that incorporate disabled bodies. Marquard Smith, in his analysis of representations of disabled athlete and model Aimee Mullins, argues that many of these portrayals incite us to view (and sexualise) her as an able-bodied woman – one that just 'happens to be an amputee' (2006: 57). The same can be said of images in fashion magazines and advertising that feature disabled models whose appearance is otherwise in line with the fashionable ideal (de Perthuis and Findlay 2019) – young, white, slim or, particularly in the case of male bodies, toned – and especially of photographs that employ the traditional iconography of fashion images in terms of pose, styling, lighting and mood.

One of the many examples of such 'mainstreaming' images is American menswear label Kenneth Cole's 2014 campaign for their fragrance Mankind Ultimate featuring Noah Galloway, a former US army sergeant who lost his left arm and leg in a war operation in Iraq. The ad is a collage of black-and-white photographs of Galloway engaging in classic 'masculine' pursuits in masculine-coded spaces: training in the gym; putting on aftershave in a sleek, minimal bathroom; sitting on a suave leather sofa wearing a formal suit and smiling confidently into the camera; and so on. In most of these images his amputations are clearly discernible: in full-length photos he wears a visible leg prosthesis, while his missing arm is accentuated by the styling of his shirt and jacket or, in the photograph from the gym, by his toplessness. And yet, these images look pacifyingly familiar; they do not create a visceral encounter with disability for the viewer. The monochrome takes any hint of fleshiness out of Galloway's body and endows the images with a veneer of generic tasteful blandness. The smooth surface of Galloway's impeccably ironed shirt, his confident stance and the absence of sweat in the gym images betray no hint of effort, vulnerability, pain or awkwardness that would inevitably accompany getting dressed or shaving, let alone doing push-ups or boxing, one-handed. To put it in the words of disability dance scholar Ann Cooper Albright, these representations are 'informed by an ethos that reinstates the classical body within the disabled one. Although embodied differently, cultural conceptions of grace, speed, strength, agility and control nonetheless structure these [images'] aesthetics' (Cooper Albright 1997: 83). These photographs are immensely digestible and pleasurable to look at; they leave the viewer

comfortably unaffected, not confronted with embodied difference.

The cultural work performed by such images is, one could argue, important and necessary: by normalising difference and making it palatable to the non-disabled viewer, they train the latter's eye to not look away when it encounters 'deviant' bodies. Unlike the enfreaking gaze that amplifies the chasm between the disabled model and the non-disabled viewer, mainstreaming neutralises the disabled body's otherness and bridges the gap between the spectator's corporeality and that of the model. This might be an indispensable first step in incorporating disability into everyday visuality. And yet, does this mode of representation really teach us to *really look* at disability? If such imagery mutes and fades some of the key aspects of disability experience; if it allows, in a way, disabled bodies to 'pass' as normative, then it does not disrupt the canon of normalcy deeply entrenched is fashion's visual vocabulary. While permitting the disabled body to occupy a space in an ableist visual culture, it ultimately does not challenge said ableism; other regimes of representation are needed to perform this difficult task.

Disability aesthetics

An alternative kind of gaze, coined by cultural theorist Tobin Siebers (2010) as 'disability aesthetics', is predicated not on foregrounding the absolute otherness of the disabled body, as in enfreakment, and not on negating its difference, as in mainstreaming; but rather, on acknowledging its difference and recognising it as productive. In his eponymous book he argues that a lot of key works of art – especially from the Modernist era – contain references to disability but have never been discussed as such:

> To what concept, other than the idea of disability, might be referred modern art's love affair with misshapen and twisted bodies, stunning variety of human forms, intense representation of traumatic injury and psychological alienation, and unyielding preoccupation with wounds and tormented flesh? Disability intercedes in the modern period to make the difference between good and bad art... good art incorporates disability (2010: 4).

Siebers goes on to discuss how Nazi art looks so kitsch to us precisely because it looks too healthy, too bombastic, while our eye has been trained, by 20th and 21st century art, to look out for the imperfect and the disorderly. Like Davis, he elaborates his point with reference to the 'mutilation' of Venus de Milo, asking 'would... if she still had both her arms'? (Siebers 2010:

5). Unlike Davis, however, Siebers does not suggest the art historian's gaze mentally restores Venus to a complete body. On the contrary, he posits that the art historian and the aesthete most certainly sees the incompleteness and takes pleasure in it. Disability aesthetics, therefore, is a lens that treats disability as an aesthetic potentiality.

In fashion, the disability aesthetics lens is particularly aptly employed by photographer Tim Walker. The bizarre, dreamlike universes his pictures conjure invite the viewer to suspend expectations of familiarity and normalcy and step into a territory of strangeness. His extremely large props and wide angles create vertiginous warps of space and proportion that unsettle the spectator and slightly throw their own sense of balance and bodily integrity. These dreamscapes are populated by equally strange, often slightly distorted or otherwise unconventional looking bodies.

His story 'The Garden of Earthly Delights', shot for Love Magazine in 2015, was inspired by Hieronymus Bosch's painting of the same name. The 23-page phantasmagoria is shot with a wide lens camera and features ten of models who are pictured in grand yet faded interiors, surrounded by surreal objects inspired by Bosch's painting, such as giant sea shells, oversized and somewhat menacing-looking flowers and fruit and transparent spheres that comfortable fit several bodies. One of the images portrays Melanie Gaydos, a partially blind model with ectodermal dysplasia, a rare genetic condition that can cause abnormalities bones and skin. Gaydos has no teeth, hair or eyebrows and has a cleft palate. She is photographed sitting at a table covered in green tablecloth, looking into the camera unflinchingly, without smiling; one of her fingers is resting on an oversized pearl (Fig. 2).

Ambiguity is woven into this portrayal. As if fulfilling the quest in a Brothers' Grimm tale, Gaydos is neither naked nor dressed: she wears no garments other than a headpiece reminiscent of a halo, a see-through veil over her head that covers her face and upper body, and nipple jewellery, two plates made of gold and pearls that bear a semblance to ceremonial jewellery worn by higher echelons of society in a range of traditional cultures. The translucent veil adds another layer of surreal and dreamlike quality to the image, cocooning Gaydos and creating a sense of mystery around her. Her baldness and absence of eyebrows emphasize her very high forehead that is further framed by her halo-like headpiece, invoking the late early Renaissance fashion of plucking the eyebrows and the hair off the forehead as captured, for instance, in the works of Early Netherlandish painters such as Jan van Eyck, Petrus Christus (e.g., his 'Portrait of a Young Girl') and Rogier van der Weyden (e.g., 'Portrait of a Lady'). The headpiece, Gaydos's forehead and the soft, ethereal light on her pale face are also reminiscent of the images of saints, as is the slight tilt of her head and her unflinching gaze.

Her heavy lower eyelids, here particularly prominent due to the angle and the apparent lack of makeup, render her ageless: she looks neither young nor old, as if existing outside the human life cycle. Against the lush green velvet of the tablecloth and the sheen of the giant pearl she holds her finger on, her brittle nails appear like slightly chipped edges of a precious vase or sculpture.

In this image, Gaydos's body defies categories: she is not clothed and not nude, not young and not old, not smiling and not stern. Her enigmatic expression goes beyond the readily readable repertoire of human emotions; she is inscrutable. Her ageless face is difficult to immediately gender, too, adding to the overall ambivalence of the image. In this context, her cleft palate, which in other circumstances could have appeared as her defining feature, is just one unusual detail among many. She looks alien, otherworldly, but so does everything else in the series.

The effect of this strangeness is startling: it is you, the viewer, who suddenly feels like the outsider in Walker's dreamlike world. It is you who does not understand its language (why is she holding her finger on the pearl that way? What does her veil signify?), it is you who feels thrown by its odd proportions. Gaydos, on the contrary, inhabits it confidently, with ease and grace. Her extremely flexible body holds its twisted pose and slightly contorted hand position, which would have been challenging for a normative body, effortlessly. She looks, in fact, a lot more comfortable than more conventional models in other photographs from the series: their expressions are tense, their poses stiff and unnatural, while her body appears relaxed, and the intensity of her face, while profound, does not suggest unease or discomfort. She is clearly at home; it is the spectator who is a stranger, different, foreign.

This image of Gaydos therefore 'reveals the ontological precarity of so-called bounded [i.e., normatively embodied] humans' (Kupetz 2019: 49). Her difference, not the viewer's normalcy, becomes the dominant order and logic of the series. Here, like in some of his other works (such as, for instance, his portrayals of disability activist Sinéad Bourke for *Business of Fashion* magazine), Walker deploys a disability aesthetic lens that harnesses the aesthetic potential of radically different embodiment and challenges the normative gaze. If enfreakment 'render[s] [viewers] comfortably common and safely standard' (Garland-Thomson 1996: 10), disability aesthetics, conversely, destabilises the viewer's sense of their own normality. Although such images are far less common in fashion than those channelling an enfreaking or a mainstreaming gaze.

Crip aesthetics?

Disability aesthetics affects the viewer and entices them to step out of their safely sealed subjectivity, temporarily leave the comfort of their own normative embodiment. But it is still predicated on the premise that there are viewing (non-disabled) subjects who stands before the viewed (disabled) objects. While celebrating the aesthetic potential of non-normative bodies, it nevertheless does not provide the viewer with access to the disability experience and subjectivity. Disability, in this paradigm, is an objective condition that exists 'out there' for non-disabled subjects to perceive, understand and be inspired by; it is 'an aesthetic value, which is to say, it participates in a system of knowledge that provides materials for and increases critical consciousness about *the way that some bodies make other bodies feel*' (Siebers 2010: 20, emphasis added). However, it does not raise or presuppose questions about how 'some bodies' themselves feel, orient themselves, and exist in the world.

For this reason, I would like to propose the concept of crip aesthetics as a fourth mode of representing disability. This mode focuses on crip subjectivity as a way of being in the world that fosters community and interdependency and recognises the importance of desire. To illustrate this mode of representation, I turn to performances by Chicago-based fashion and art project Radical Visibility Collective and their corollary project, Rebirth Garments.

Rebirth Garments was founded by Sky Cubacub, a non-binary queer Filipinx artist based in Chicago. Specialising in 'dance wear, club wear, swimwear and lingerie' (Rebirth Garments 2021), it is created with queer and disabled people in mind and caters to 'apparent and non-apparent disabilities/ disorders – physical, mental, psychological, intellectual, developmental, emotional, etc.' (Ibid.). Gender affirming undergarments, such as chest binders, and, more recently, face masks with a transparent 'window' detail that leaves the mouth visible (thus making communications with the wearer easier for people who are deaf or hard of hearing) are among the brand's key product categories. All the items are made from stretch materials – mainly spandex – so as to be comfortable and accessible to people with various degrees of sensitivity.

The bright colours, refractive fabrics, exuberant prints and outlandish designs of Rebirth Garments fit within Cubacub's concept of 'Radical Visibility' (Cubacub 2015) for queer, trans* and disabled people. Cubacub's lengthy and articulate Manifesto argues fiercely that 'a simple yet effective way to combat this invisibility cloak that society has put over our communities is by refusing to assimilate through a dress reform movement' that allows marginalised communities 'to dress in order to not be ignored, to reject "passing" and assimilation' (Ibid.). Among the instruments to enhance such visibility through clothes Cubacub cites the use of bright colours, shiny and reflective materials, see-through fabrics and

cuts that highlight the body instead of hiding it. As Barry has argued in his investigation of crip masculinities and fashion, clothes 'designed for fat and disabled bodies typically minimize and conceal fatness and disability' (Barry 2019: 281). By refusing to conform to this tradition, Rebirth Garments' collections can be read as fostering 'fabulousness... an embodied politics that claims visibility through the dressed body' (Barry 2019: 282).

Performances that showcase Cubacub's designs are staged and produced by Radical Visibility Collective, of which Cubacub is a co-founder together with multidisciplinary artist Vogdts and fashion designer Compton G. These shows employ actual wearers of Rebirth Garments as models and thereby feature a vast variety of bodies, incorporating a whole spectrum of gender and racial identities and abilities. The soundtracks that accompany these shows feature lyrics written on the basis of detailed interviews with these people where they describe their identity, style and moves; some of the lines are taken verbatim from their speech. The resulting voiceovers, one of which was cited in full at the beginning of this chapter, serve several purposes and invoke multiple references.

Firstly, they are (poeticised) audio descriptions of what is going on onstage, designed to engage these who are unable to see it for themselves. Providing such descriptions makes live events and images accessible for visually impaired people; at conferences focusing on disability studies, for instance, it is increasingly commonplace for speakers to provide such descriptions of themselves, and Cubacub always starts their public speaking engagements with such a description. However, within fashion shows they are still exceedingly rare. The provision of audio descriptions within the context of a fashion event throws into sharp relief the fundamental inaccessibility of a standard runway show for visually impaired audiences. This inaccessibility is so naturalised as to hardly ever be discussed, although there is, of course, no reason to imagine that visually impaired people do not wish to engage with fashion.

Secondly, and perhaps most obviously, by enunciating and hailing each performer's appearance these voiceovers invoke the ballroom culture. Along with the musical style and colourful clothing, they locate Radical Visibility Collective's main source of influence, as well as object of critique: the queer nightclub scene. In a statement, the collective says: 'As avid Chicago queer nightlifers, we are both inspired by the experimental and magical atmosphere of parties and critical of how these spaces exclude certain bodies through their structure, architecture, and environment... The Radical Visibility Collective combats... these problematic aspects' (Rebirth Garments 2021). The inaccessibility of certain club spaces is addressed, however humorously, in some of the lyrics that accompany the performances. I will return to the significance of these references to queer nightlife below.

Thirdly, the voiceovers locates the performances within the lineage of fashion shows. A voice describing every outfit was a feature of early-to-mid 20th century fashion shows where a compère would announce outfits as they entered the runway (Evans 2013; Newby 1962). The difference here, of course, is that early fashion shows would only offer descriptions of outfits, while Radical Visibility Collective's descriptions also incorporate a discussion of the model's gender, racial and, where appropriate, crip identity and their dance style.

The language of the lyrics deserves a separate analysis. Brimming with heavy sexual innuendo (one of the recurrent refrains goes, unequivocally, 'sex sex sex sex sex'), they intersperse it with references to disability identity and crip lived experiences: the wonderfully alliterated phrase 'delicious, disabled', cited earlier, is a case in point, as are expressions such as 'sexy AFO' (referring to AFO, a prosthetic device designed for people with clubfeet) that the lyrics describing the outfits are peppered with. There is, for instance, an ironic track 'Access Bitch' that makes reference to access needs such as ramps and lifts. This track, like many others in the soundtrack, sits with the tradition of 'bitch' tracks: the specifically queer, deeply sensual tracks that emerged in New York's 1990s ballroom scene and would often accompany voguing. Usually reserved for spaces of heightened eroticism and sexual transgression, in Radical Visibility Collective's shows these tracks are infused with the language of crip culture. Another refrain, 'Stim toy baby / I'm your stim toy joy / Stimy stimy toy joy', refers to stimming, i.e., self-stimulating behaviours, particularly common among autistic people, that involve repetitive movements or noises. Stim toys are used in neurodiverse communities to fill the need for stimming (the most common ones are fidget spinners and chewables). However, when delivered with seductive vocals and within an eroticised context, the expression becomes ambivalent. One cannot help wondering: is it the anti-stimming device that is being invoked here, or is it a sex toy/sexual practice?

By intertwining the language of sexual desire with the language of disability, Radical Visibility Collective iterates the notion of '"crip," the non-compliant, anti-assimilationist position that disability is a desirable part of the world' (Hamraie and Fritsch 2019: 2). As Lennard Davis once remarked, 'Disabled bodies are not permitted to participate in the erotics of power, in the power of the erotic, in the economy of transgression. There has been virtually no liberatory rhetoric... tied to prostheses, wheelchairs, colostomy bags, canes, or leg braces' (1995, 158). Rebirth Garments' performances redress this omission by conjuring images of desire and erotic pleasure that are rooted in, and thrive on, the crip experience. Another audio description further testifies to this:

Now ima slow it down
For the baddie comin out
Black, young and disabled
And she beautiful no fable
Rocking pink on pink on pink
Mini dress but she no shrink
Booty shakin at the function
Wheelchair dancin dance wit me
Elbow crutches for the dutchess
And she strapped up on the feet
Everybody clap your hands
For Miss Alexis she's a queen yeah

During this recital, Miss Alexis, a curvy Black woman, arrives on the stage in a wheelchair wearing a tight pink mini dress and shimmering shocking pink socks. She gets out of the wheelchair, turns her back to the audience and shakes her hips, slapping her behind every now and then while holding on to her wheelchair for support. She then takes hold of the crutches that she carries in the back of her wheelchair and walks with fierce determination, albeit not without difficulty due to her deformed feet, towards the other models, leaving the wheelchair behind. A second later, the next performer – a non-binary Filipinx person kitted out in an Yves Klein blue and silver outfit complete with a blue visor – jumps out, carrying bastons used in kali martial arts, and begins to a dance incorporating complex martial arts moves.

By displaying a vast variety of moving styles, these performances 'deconstruct the polarisation of ability and disability' (Cooper Albright 1997: 57). Extremely athletic models perform cartwheels, ballet *pas* and acrobatic tricks while dancing alongside models on crutches and models in wheelchairs. As each participant's moves are discussed in the voiceover, both the acrobatics and the use of wheelchairs become quirks of individual modes of mobility; none of them is constructed as more normal or desirable than others. Moreover, many participants arrive equipped with an item that is woven into their moves and emphasises their on-stage persona: one has a fake blue microphone, another carries soft spiky balls. These items, too, are named in the voiceover as parts of performers' unique identities. Among these playful objects, assistive devices used by other participants, such as rollators, prosthetic limbs and crutches, appear as yet another instance of creative accessorising, rather than as signifiers of medical

needs. Hypermobile bodies and bodies with limited mobility, medical devices and toys all get entangled in a shared dance where their differences are no longer converted into chasms.

The diversity and affective bonds of bodies that participate in Radical Visibility Collective's shows are best described with a quote from Fritsch and McGuire's discussion of another performance collective that focuses on queer and disabled people of colour, Sins Invalid: 'Their bodies are a nexus of multiplicities: fat and thin, black, brown, white, Latinx, Asian, and mixed... They are bare chested, femme and butch, covered and exposed...They are... moving together. They are in touch' (2018: viii). The sense of intimacy and interdependence – one of the key features of crip culture (Kafer 2013, Hamraie & Fritsch 2019) – invoked in Cubacub's work is in stark contrast with the logic of individual exceptionalism and personal achievement that permeates, for instance, Viktoria Modesta's performances and many other portrayals of disability within fashion. Cubacub's shows conjure the ethos of queer utopia (Muñoz 2009) where community ties are paramount and where normativity is redundant. As well as queering, they are also cripping the fashion show: 'disnormalising, adamantly refusing compulsory heterosexuality, compulsory able-bodiedness, and homonormativity' (Kafer 2013: 122), by incorporating 'dangerous' bodies that do not readily fit into the common corporeal frameworks in more than one way, whose differences run along multiple axis and are animated by their distinct movement styles. In that sense, these performances are an example of what Robert McRuer, in an interview, defines as 'crip cultural production':

> Compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness generate sites of containment, where disability and queerness are managed, contained, kept quiet, kept silent. And crip cultural production has been about saying, 'we're not going to stand for that', so to speak. 'We are going to generate visions of the body and desire and community that are in excess of attempts to contain and manage us' (Peers, Brittain & McRuer 2012: 148-149).

Conclusion

This chapter has inspected some of the key modes of representation of disability in fashion and visual culture. It has demonstrated ways in which some of these strategies, such as enfreakment (Garland-Thomson 1996) and mainstreaming, reframe disability as super-ability and fashion-ability in order to make it more palatable to the viewer, or else neutralise and tame embodied difference. Conversely, portrayals that sit within the disability aesthetics and crip aesthetics modes 'do not hesitate to represent the ragged edges and blunt angles of the disabled body in

a matter of fact way.... as if they are trying to get people to see something that is right before their eyes and yet invisible to most' (Siebers 2019: 179). These latter images disrupt the canons of enfreakment and instead engage in a process of 'dis-enfreakment', focusing on the humanity, vulnerability and desire(ability) of non-normative bodies rather than examining their otherness. They propose new ways of speaking across differences by using the language of fashion visuals, thus 'fashioning alternative biologies, alternative subjectivities and viable nonnormative modes of life' (Mitchell, Antebi and Snyder 2019: 2).

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