In *Crip Theory*, Robert McRuer aligns queerness and disability, and the result is a new discourse, a shifting lexicon, a repositioning of signs and bodies. It is counter-intuitive to most that anyone would *want* to align with disability or queerness. And, historically, these identity categories have been defined against one another: homosexuality as some terrible disease or genetic flaw; people with disabilities as sexually inappropriate, over or under-sexed, as "freaks." McRuer challenges some of these stereotypes. However, he also subverts them and repurposes them, creating a new vocabulary and changing the rules not just for disability studies and queer studies, but for feminist theory, gender studies, literary theory, cultural studies and (surprisingly, but importantly) composition theory. This book heavily references Judith Butler, Adrienne Rich, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michael Warner, Lennard Davis, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. Yet McRuer establishes some distance from these theorists—he doesn’t necessarily disagree with their work, but he extends it, applies it to new scenes. And McRuer picks an inspiring and motley team of characters to people these scenes: Sharon Kowalski; self-proclaimed “black, queer sociopath” Gary Fisher; P. T Barnum; the Black Panthers; supermasochist Bob Flanagan; dating reality show *The Littlest Groom*. By the end of the book, it seems as though McRuer has invited this team to the bedside of an AIDS patient and the apartment of an obsessive-compulsive, toured them through Wal-Mart, led them onto the set of a reality television show, escorted them down the wedding aisle, marched on Washington, and booked them at the M.O.M.A. The effect is pleasurably disconcerting.

The title of the book, *Crip Theory*, is a subversive play on the word “cripple.” In this review, I will also be emphasizing the importance of “crip”tical thinking, and we’ll move away from the rhetorical and linguistic framework that casts disability as, at best, impaired function. I’ll try to provide a primer for the new language that emerges from McRuer’s radical recasting of queerness and disability. Let’s call it a Criptionary. Like McRuer, we will be dissing the medical, pathological
lexicon and the violence such terminology sanctions. This crip vocabu-
lar, far from halting signification and arresting meaning, instead tran-
scribes the surreal action of the complex and contradictory culture in
which we live and reveals the future we might teach towards.

In the academic wrangling over identity politics, and the continued
grappling over post-identity politics, we tend to sweat a lot in the fraught
territory of "intersectionality." Scholars in disability studies have staked
out a dangerous space in such conversations, suggesting that disability is
the ultimate category of abjection, or arguing that we are actually all
disabled. Such statements often form in response to the idea that disability
is just an add-on to the regular suspects of identity politics—race, class,
gender, sexuality—and is retrofit onto the PC bandwagon. However, the
danger of universalizing disability, or ratcheting up its importance, is that
disability is played as a trump card, neutralized or seen as transcendent
(and somehow not materially real). For people with disabilities, the
experience of oppression is undercut, their situated knowledges ignored.
Yet it is worth paying cautious attention to the ways disability is used to
stigmatize almost all "minority" groups, how such groups often distance
themselves from disability without challenging its derogatory entail-
ments, thus reifying them, and how norms circulate, affect us all, and are
enforced by us all. McRuer pulls off this careful dance, and he also shows
how all norms of mental and bodily ability move in concert with norms
of sex and sexuality, each swinging the other.

Robert McRuer’s book represents what is most complicated and most
useful about disability studies—embracing political struggle situated in
changing economic and cultural circumstances, challenging negative
cultural constructions of disability, and deftly negotiating, disrupting,
and rewriting the "intersections" between forms of oppression, between
identity categories, and between embodied subjects.

There is a whispering voice caught between the pages of this book,
warning against both generalization and over-specification: disability
and queerness cannot be denied, but should not be co-opted; should be
desired, but not for the sake of political correctness. In his preface to the
book, Michael Bérubé coins the term "conjunctural analysis" to describe
McRuer’s intersectional work (viii). He is careful not to suggest that such
analysis invite an "additive approach"—simply adding identity catego-
ries into a mix, checking off boxes, fearful of forgetting about a system of oppression, a stigmatized group, a cultural consideration (vii). However, Bérubé notes that a “rigorous conjunctural analysis” is one “that leaves no form of identity behind”; the more tangled the web, the more powerful it becomes (viii). We must be comprehensively conjunctural, yet not uncritically so. It is hard, as a reader being introduced to Robert McRuer, not to be slightly afraid. The key is that, as McRuer says, “traces of agency, resistance, and hope . . . are as legible where identity disintegrates as where it comes together” (145). As Bérubé suggests, the true beauty and power of a conjunctural analysis are revealed when we direct attention towards the tension and the tears, the static, the sutures and scars, rather than the final coherence of any identity or any alliance. One rule for this Criptionary, I’ll suggest, is that conjunction also always means disjunction.

Bringing together disability and queerness, then, mobilizes such tension, welcomes strain, allows for wonderful identity wreckage. As McRuer writes, disability and queerness are united in abjection—contemporary, neoliberal, late capitalist, postmodern culture cunningly demands compulsory able-bodiedness and heterosexuality. Both queerness and disability are the outline, composed of outliers, that give shape to the white space of normalcy. This said, the subversive potential of queerness has been reclaimed. McRuer shows that the same can be done for disability.

In the old order of things (traces of which are still shockingly and dangerously present), there was a need to view, segregate, and discipline embodied difference—a need to create docile, radically Other homosexualities and disabilitities. Now, in the “heightened urgency [of] our particular moment,” and through the vague, yet equally virulent manifestations of a postmodern normativity, a more flexible subject is possible; there is “less rigidity in terms of how oppression is reproduced” (154, 3). We can celebrate difference, but difference is also often appropriated and contained by such celebration. Compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory heterosexuality now demand more “flexible bodies”—a term McRuer borrows from Emily Martin. There is a more nebulous imperative for able-bodiedness and heterosexuality. We ask, now, for genericized and accessible subjectivities. We want vacated—and thus visitable—queer
and disabled subjectivities. Previously, disability and queerness were pathologized, rooted to the evil, the lack of control, the excessiveness, the disorder of the individual body. Otherness was the fault of the Other. Now, as McRuer shows, rising out of social movements that challenged such ableist constructions, we are experiencing a less definable gender trouble, ability trouble. We are stretched beyond the binary relationship between ability and disability, queer and straight, recognizing ourselves along a continuum, and sometimes fostering the dangerous assumption that we all can easily move along this continuum, like rolling up and down a ramp. The problem is that, as McRuer shows, we are still pushed powerfully towards “epiphanies” of heteronormativity and able-bodiedness (13).

For example, McRuer shows how Jack Nicholson’s character in the movie *As Good as it Gets* becomes whole—he accepts his queer, sick neighbor as he loses his own disability and finds heterosexual love. In the TV show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, McRuer shows how, each week, the protagonist gains heterosexual muscle through queer training, and how the trainers rely upon jokes about disability to elevate their coaching. The shaping of a “real (postmodern) man” requires the development of a queer eye, trained on a heterosexual prize, and the acknowledgment that the old, bumbling self was “so retarded” (177). A flexible body lands in the same ableist space as the docile body and removes disability and queerness back to a familiar (abjected) place. This flexible body just goes through more overt gymnastics to arrive at “normal.” So when McRuer writes about the masochistic, queer/disabled, queering/cripping performance art of Bob Flanagan, for instance, he also reveals the possibility for subversion, for moving beyond the facile flexibility that a more “accepting” society demands. McRuer sincerely hopes that “queerness, in its most critical sense, might generate disability, while disability might breed queerness” (102). This book limbers us up for such transformation; his cast of crippled and queer characters performs epiphanies of deviance, or overperforms the norm ironically. I’ll suggest that readers of this book will find themselves convinced, against all of the common sense our ableist culture has given to us, that disability and queerness are desirable.

In order to mobilize the subversive possibilities of disability, McRuer advocates for what he calls a “critically disabled position” that might
“further the crisis, the inadequate resolutions that compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness offer us” (31). This positioning comes across most clearly in his chapter on composition pedagogy, “Composing Queerness and Disability: The Corporate University and Alternative Corporealities,” parts of which were first published in JAC. His thesis is that pedagogy-as-usual is ineffective and, specifically, out of touch with the fragmented nature of embodied experience. He argues that “composing is defined as the production of order” yet it is “experienced as the opposite” (149). That is, composition demands the performance of able-bodiedness which, like the demand for heteronormativity, results only ever in comedic performances. McRuer argues that composition is “focused on a fetishized final product” that is straight (151). (And, I might add, has cohesion, flow, voice, isn’t fragmented, dangling, awkward, or constipated.) However, he argues that we should in fact strive to focus on the messiness of writing and writing bodies, to “keep our attention on disruptive, inappropriate, composing bodies—bodies that invoke a future horizon beyond straight composition” (155). He argues that the moments in which we are all queer/disabled are desirable (157–59). Picking through the dangerous rhetoric of the we-are-all-disabled claim, he pushes for a “temporary or contingent universalization of queerness/disability” instead of a “banal, humanistic universalization” of same (157). Different from a “virtually disabled position,” a critically disabled position is more about positionality than materiality. That is, to be critically disabled is not to claim a disabled body and thus dilute the embodied experience of impairment or the social experience of oppression that accompanies disability in a particular space and time. Instead, it is to recognize the ways that disability is partially socially constructed, and to pay attention to the ways such social constructions might be recast, not to reinforce the negative positioning of the disabled body, and not to deny disability, but to affirm it, recognize its potential, and provide access. Advocating for critical queerness, “severe disability” and crip consciousness, McRuer reclaims terms that have been used as wide brushes for the application of stigma, and he artistically reframes their meanings.

From a critically disabled position, then, what McRuer does is crip. To crip is to expose and reproduce disjunction, to refuse order and
embrace messiness. This is at once a scabrous and fabulous process, illuminating the hypocrisies of the norm and inflating them into parody. McRuer lists several goals of what he calls, alternately, crip theory, coming out crip, and crippin’. Like queering, crippin’ names a deconstructive process situated within culture, within everyday life, but at high stakes—like queering, crippin’ can be robbed of its subversive power. He suggests we claim a disability identity politics only while also facilitating a “necessary contestatory relationship to that identity politics” (71). He advocates for coming out crip—acknowledging the ways that we are all disabled, yet severely wary of such claims, always talking back to the norms that we acknowledge and perhaps reinforce in exchange for legitimacy. He suggests we demand access to another world in which disability can be desired, rather than being the “raw material against which the imagined future world is formed” (72; emphasis added). His book represents a map to such liberating destinations. He shows how we can work as crip critics by examining how “sites or locations where disability identities emerge will always be interrogated and transformable, sustaining our understanding that who we are or might be can only have meaning in relation to who we are not (yet)” (72). Finally, as he writes (and writes about writing), he wields subversive narratives, digressive vignettes, troubling juxtapositions, and deconstructive analyses. He crips academic discourse.

Consider what it might mean to accept that no one thinks or writes from normal, that the body is defined more by its incompleteness and need for connection with tools and others, more by its weirdness, confusion and vulnerability than by its uniform, independent penetration of reality. When we broach such considerations, we feel a challenge to our own agency and autonomy, but we actually also gain perspective—a queer, crip perspective.

Shifting the focus to who we are not yet provides us with an opportunity to welcome difference, to release (for a moment) the stake we hold and consider how we might be Otherwise. McRuer uses the idea of “welcoming” the “specters of disability” to conclude the book (199). He defines welcoming as “an always-impossible act but one that cannot wait, an act that entails acknowledging the other that haunts the self” (208). The welcome belongs to the “time of the promise,” the “non-presentable”
McRuer here invokes Derrida, and the idea of difference and deferral, as he also echoes the idea, born in the disability community, that we will all one day become disabled. However, McRuer goes beyond this statement, a statement often interpreted as a threat, to suggest that we should “always comprehend disability otherwise and . . . , collectively, somehow access other worlds and futures” (208). Finally, for the author, criping the world is not a threat. Instead, welcoming the disability to come, we might understand disability not as a universalized phenomenon, yet as a global reality, not as a static identity into which one might comfortably move, but as a state of transition that, in the right environment, facilitates continued movement.

For composition and rhetoric scholars, such welcoming suggests several questions. First of all, as we queer and crip composition theory, can we view the ways that our body of scholarship projects itself against this transformation, or co-opts Other bodies? How do we flex towards a politically correct position while wrestling against genuine ideological, political, pedagogical, and institutional change? Where do we find conjunction/disjunction? Finally, how can we welcome all of the bodies in our classrooms, including our own?

*Crip Theory* reveals that normalcy, identity, and desire are rhetorically charged fields. But McRuer shows, through intersectional and conjunctural movement, how polarities have shifted in contemporary culture. Most importantly, speaking to the writer, the teacher, or student of writing, he shows how acts of representation (right down to the semantic level) are queer and crip even when fetishized as straight and clean, discrete and complete. He suggests that we might welcome such messiness. Thus, it is with pleasure that the work of this Criptionary is to finally fail to define cultural signs of queerness and disability. . . .