

# The Inarticulate Post-Socialist Crip

## On the Cruel Optimism of Neoliberal Transformations in the Czech Republic

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The article proposes a cripistemological reading of post-socialist rehabilitation in Czechoslovakia in the early 1990s. It discusses the ways in which disability semantics and ideological structures of compulsory health and able-bodiedness served to fuel the optimism of the first post-revolutionary years, and reveals the ways in which the possibility of crip epistemologies and politicized crip horizons were foreclosed. The example of Czechoslovakia in the early 1990s facilitates a more capacious inquiry into the toxicity of attachments to optimism—an affective politics of positivity more generally, and for disability theory specifically. The article also argues for more intense engagement with disability in theories of neoliberalism and formulates a crip critique of the affective politics of neoliberalism for which Lauren Berlant coined the term “cruel optimism.”

### Crip Signing

In 2009, twenty years past the collapse of the Czech communist regime and state socialism in 1989, Jan Potměšil,<sup>1</sup> disabled in a car accident during protest work in that same year, is reported to have said, “If I was to choose between the rule of communists and being able to walk again, I would take the chair” (qtd. in Remešová). The quote is illuminating even if its tabloid source may make us doubt its authenticity. It reveals that discourses of post-socialism were rich with prosthetic narratives of disability, rehabilitation, and cure. It also reveals the importance of discourses of post-socialist “transformation” for shaping political consciousness in the Czech Republic of today. This short anecdote foreshadows some of the central questions of my article: What does the symbolic juxtaposition of dis/ability and “the rule of communists” mean for the introduction of (neoliberal) capitalism into Czechoslovakia? And—most importantly—how did

1. In the revolutionary autumn of 1989, Potměšil was one of the students, artists, and activists travelling around the Czech Republic to spread support for regime change. Interestingly, becoming disabled turned Potměšil into an impromptu embodiment of the revolution as his “incapacitated” body was transfigured into a symbolic sacrifice for collective freedom (and capacity).

this juxtaposition influence epistemologies of disability and the im/possibility of what we might term, adapting José Muñoz, crip horizons?

The possibility of critical imaginaries and visions of the political are central to my exploration here. In my reading of the early years of post-socialist transformation, I am looking for a “structure of feeling,” the term Raymond Williams uses for the residue of shared historical experiences, or what Lauren Berlant calls “affective attachments” and “a structure of relationality” (13). The structure of feeling I pursue here reflects how much “[i]t matters how we arrive at the places we do” (Ahmed, *Queer*, 2), individually as well as collectively. The affective politics of the post-socialist transformation leads me to explore the conditions for intelligibility of political and social concepts and imaginaries; this is one of the meanings I invoke with the concept of horizon. The affects, I argue, help to pose questions of “political horizon”:

What are the factors that make political action conceivable at all, or that make some forms of activism thinkable while others are, or become, wholly unimaginable? How do attitudes within a social group or collectivity about what is politically possible, desirable, and necessary—what I call a *political horizon*—get established, consolidated, stabilized, and reproduced over time, and with what sorts of effects on political action? (Gould 3)

The following discussion traces two lines of argument. First, I reveal how disability metaphors and broader ideological structures of health and compulsory able-bodiedness were appropriated to fuel the optimism of the post-revolutionary years. I argue that a curative logic smoothed the way and provided legitimation for neoliberal transformations. Second, I cruise through the disability journalism of the early 1990s (1990–1992) to explore the disability positionalities articulated there.<sup>2</sup>

The larger question that underlies my ruminations on the 1990s addresses the cultural and contextual contingencies of toxic attachments to optimism, progress, and an affective politics of positivity in the present moment of austerity. The theses that I propose complicate the affective attachments to optimistic visions of free, democratic futurity by arguing that these visions cruelly reduced the meaning of freedom to the freedom of the market and foreclosed more complex negotiations of the meaning of *the social*.

2. Specifically, for the purposes of this article, I lean on an analysis of two journals: *Elán* (*Vigour*) and *Vozíčkář* (*The Wheelchair User*); the former is a platform of the official and state-sanctioned Union of Invalids (Svaz Invalidů) and as such represents a continuity with the era of state socialism. The latter, on the other hand, is a new journal founded after the regime change as an explicit critique of *Elán*.

As my analysis indicates, the post-revolution euphoria transmuted quite rashly into the form of affectivity that Berlant defines as “cruel optimism” and summarizes as a relation in which “something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (2). The cruel optimism of the post-socialist moment in Czechoslovakia, I propose, foreclosed the possibility of crip epistemologies. In the post-socialist moment when social belonging appears defined (and conditioned) by the compulsory affects of curative positivity, cripness is an impossible location; it is unintelligible and lies beyond the conceivable, thinkable, and imaginable political horizon.

Yet, there is a different meaning of horizon that speaks to this impossibility of crip(ness) in times of post-socialist rehabilitation into/through neoliberalism. Making Muñoz’s imagination more generously accommodating and accessible, we could envision “[cripness as] not yet here [and as] ideality [...] that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future” (*Cruising*, 1). The metaphor of the inarticulate crip that I offer here gestures toward such a horizon transgressing the “presentness” (25) and the normatively progressive futurity of straight *and* abled time (of rehabilitation, shock therapies, and cure). Thus, as I argue toward the end of the article, the inarticulate crip allows us to revisit and complicate the past to forge different versions of desires for crip futures.

The following image elucidates the metaphor and the ways in which it allows for imaging a cripness defiant of compulsory positivity and optimism.



Photograph used with permission of the photographer.

The image captures two women, half-clad/half-naked, sitting face-to-face, one on a hospital bed, one in front of it. The drab environment, the pills, used cups, and fashion magazines surrounding the women tell a story of sickness and an improvised/impooverished home. However, the women are so engrossed in each other that the markers of illness, death, and destitution seem to disappear in a momentous bliss of erotic and mutual care.

The image is a part of larger series titled “I do not want to die yet!” (“Chci ještě žít”), which received a lot of attention, as well as critical acclaim, in the Czech Republic. The series of Jan Šibík, a Czech photographer applauded for his “humanitarian projects,” documents life in an asylum in Odessa, Ukraine, where people with AIDS were left to themselves; those who still could, cared for those closer to death.

The whole series is waiting for an overdue critical intervention: it fetishizes AIDS and death; it exploits narratives of tragedy and despair; it objectifies both the people photographed and their ill bodies; and, most importantly, it traffics in images of a post-Soviet “AIDS-infested Ukraine” to bolster Czech pride in capitalist success and post-socialist overcoming. And yet, the images invite *crip signing*, a crip version of “homosexual hearing,” a stratagem for reading culture (and cultural texts) against the grain for the purpose of survival and crafting alternative futures (Marga Gomez, qtd. in Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 3). “Crip signing,” like “homosexual hearing,” is a form of “disidentification,” a tactic “that neither opts to assimilate [...] nor strictly oppose [dominant ideologies]” but rather “works on and against dominant ideology” (Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 2) at its seams. Crip signing is a critical gesture toward something that is not fully articulated, something that cannot be expressed in the language of identity and political pragmatism. Taking its cue from Marga Gomez, who heard the calling of homosexuality in moments of ambivalence that combined desire with shame, or recognition with abjection, crip signing in this particular image can be imagined as a moment that “disses” the ideologies of (heterosexual) sexuality but also ideological notions of health, reproductive femininity, able-bodied longevity, and, most acutely, the compulsorily optimistic visions of cure. Crip signing, like homosexual hearing, paradoxically crafts survival out of abjection and stigma.

This (lesbian) crip picture captures a powerful clash between failure and sustenance.<sup>3</sup> In their “AIDS-as-death-sentence” existence, the two women are meant to embody “failure” in relation to ideologies of vitality and able-bodied

3. I use the term *lesbian* here to denote forms of gendered intimacy, closeness, care, and erotics neither dependent on nor wholly defined by the notion of lesbian identity.

health, as well as ideologies of (hetero)normative femininity. Yet, despite its rawness and the ways in which it actually emphasizes the visual markers of illness, the image signifies (however ephemeral, however crip) thriving. It attaches the women's bodies to each other by acts of interdependent care, while their ambivalent positioning allows—even calls for and invites—sexual fantasies, turning the two women into subjects of (each other's) desire. In this, they paradoxically embody a moment of careless sorority and of mutual care/pleasure. The ways in which the “failure” of AIDS/illness can be turned into sustaining cripness, the intimate relationality that challenges the individualizing medical narrative, the pleasure/desire that is an “angry fist in the eye” to narratives of fatality and despair (Wade 24), and the embodiment and practices of care reveal not only the negligence of the Ukrainian state but, more importantly, a challenge to the narrative of capitalism's global success and the vision of capitalism as the only and best future.

The crip signing so clear now, however, remained long illegible to me despite the fact that the image series was on my syllabus for an AIDS and politics class for several years. How had I not responded to the complicated network of pleasures/hurt the image embodies and speaks to? What cripistemological lessons can be drawn from this personal experience with the un/intelligibility of *crip signing*? These are some of the questions that inspire the remainder of my analysis. Genealogies of disability in a post-socialist Czechoslovakia may shed more light on why crip epistemologies have been unintelligible (and not viable) in this specific geopolitical location. But, despite the focus on a specific location, the theses and questions that I put forth in this article have a broader radius. Cruising geopolitical time and place that no longer exist poses challenges to discussions and critical reflections on neoliberalism and austerity in the present moment. More specifically, it opens a critical dialogue with epistemologies of disability and cripness developed only/mostly on experiences of the West/global North. In particular, the various figurations of the inarticulate/inarticulable crip problematize epistemologies of disability that expunge ambiguity and require fully developed and articulated identity positions. In brief, the post-socialist crip appears to be precisely the “disorientation device” (Ahmed, *Queer* 171) to attune us to what has been slipping to “the point at which things fleet” (172) away from safe and “positive” epistemologies. Such a disorientation is necessary if we are to imagine crip horizons.

### Disability Semantics of Transition and Capitalist Rehabilitation

Exploring the “post” of socialism, Katherine Verdery prefaces her book *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?* with a short retort, which in its beautiful irony seems to capture the prevailing logic of the historical moment: “Q: *What is the definition of socialism?* A: *The longest and most painful route from capitalism to capitalism.*” Similarly, Jiří Kabele’s sociological study, led by the ambition to provide a concise version of Czech history in the twentieth century, reflects the same sentiment in its title: *On the Road from Capitalism to Socialism and Back*. It presents a vision of modern Czech/oslovak history as a cyclical move from capitalism to capitalism, wherein the forty-year period of state socialism is posed as a temporary deviation, an unfortunate false turn “on the road from capitalism to capitalism.” Indicated already in the rhetorical exercise of Verdery’s Q and A, the belief that there is no other future than global capitalism punctuated cultural imaginations of the “transformation” of post-socialist Czechoslovakia: it ran through pop culture, academic representations of the process, and the many foreign reflections on the events of the period. In this preliminary archaeology of the discourse of transformation, I am interested in unearthing its dependence upon ideologies of cure and recuperation that have played a crucial role not only in situating discourses of disability but, even more crucially, *all* visions of the social.

Elaine Weiner organized the dominant significations of socialism and capitalism that circulated (not only) in the 1990s into a neatly illustrative table that helps to draw out the highly normative evaluations of both political regimes (58).

#### *Planned economy*

*Evil*

Failure

East

Past

Constraint/Captivity

Premodernity/Uncivilized

Stagnation/Regression

Abnormality/Artificiality

Human design

Irrationality

Immorality

Collectivism

#### *Market economy*

*Good*

Success

West/Europe

Future

Opportunity/Freedom

Modernity/Civilization

Development/Progress

Normality/Naturality

Human nature

Rationality

Morality

Individualism



The binary structure makes it sardonically clear that ascribing failure to socialism/communism functions as a projection enabling the imagined successes of capitalism. Weiner's table also reveals the extent to which economic markers and structures became the criteria and defining characteristics for evaluating societies; indeed, the conflation of freedom and a "market economy" has persisted as the hegemonic vision until the present. This is the cruel aftermath of the transformation period.<sup>4</sup>

Even if unreflected in Weiner's analysis, these binaries reveal the extent to which an epistemology of the socialist other is hoisted upon a negative semantics of disability. They also reveal the extent to which the passage from a failed communism/socialism—state of regression, immorality, and irrationality—corresponds to semantic and ideological structures that, drawing on work of Henri Stiker, Robert McRuer terms a "cultural grammar of rehabilitation" (*Crip*, 112; see also Stiker).<sup>5</sup> Semantics of illness and disability crop up everywhere in early evaluations of post-socialist and post-revolution Czechoslovakia. Already the first new year's presidential address introduced a metaphor of malady as Václav Havel opened his message to the citizenry with a bitter pill and spoke of the state's decline: "our country does not flourish." He later made explicit references to sickness and added a clear moral impetus: "[in socialism] we became morally ill [...]." The same rhetoric also pervades the State of the Czech Republic Address from March 1990 delivered by then-Prime Minister Petr Pithart. He characterized communism as a health risk, blamed it for the whole population's "loss of general *immunity*," and identified it as "the most dangerous *bomb ticking away in our organisms*" ("Zpráva," 9, emphases added). These brief examples should suffice to indicate not only the extent to which the political imaginary of the post-revolution moment relied upon visions of sickness and malignancy, but also that these visions—as is very clearly indicated by the metaphor of a ticking bomb—could be deployed as part of a moral appeal for (rehabilitative) transformation.

Thus the process of "transition" from socialism to the new social order could be dubbed literally the "path to recovery" and "cure" ("Here, the prevention is

4. A few days prior to finalizing this article in the autumn of 2013, the Czech Republic held pre-term elections following the fall of the right-wing government responsible for austerity measures. In a bizarre outcome representing the general frustration and growing precarity, Andrej Babiš, a billionaire and entrepreneur, came close to winning the election. He promised to "run the state as a firm" in order to be a good manager in this state/entrepreneurship hybrid.

5. Notions of rehabilitation resound in the dominant significations attached to the process of the "transition." Phrases such as "the return to Europe" or the "rediscovery of civil society" (cf. Hann 10) attributed to the development in post-socialist countries are illustrative of the process of the othering of (post-)socialism and of the power dynamic between "East" and "West."

not enough, cure is necessary” [Pithart, “Programové”]), while the immediacy and desperate acuteness of the metaphoric ticking bomb legitimized the shock nature of this recovery: “The path to recovery will be very difficult. [...] Every step of the reforms will cause a shock from which we will have to learn again and again how to recover” (“Zpráva,” 10). Arguably, the trauma caused by the process of recovery (from the malignancy of the communist past) functions as both a means to overcome the sickness and as a means of (moral) cleansing.

The extent to which ideologies of *ability and health* are utilized to celebrate/legitimize the new social order of neoliberal capitalism raises new questions for the critical exploration of discourses of transformation and their formative impact upon the present. What does it mean for future visions of society and sociality that socialism and communism are signified as harmful and unhealthy anomalies to the presumed universal (and universally capitalist) social order, to the “assumed prior, normal state” (Stiker, qtd. in McRuer, *Crip*, 111)? Why and how do ideologies of health and ability give legitimacy to the new social order? What repercussions for crip and disability politics follow from figuring the post-socialist and current political regime as the result of successful rehabilitative therapy?

The import of these questions goes well beyond the scope of disability critique. The rehabilitative grammar of post-socialist transition had ramifications for all critical projects and transformative visions of social parity and social justice in post-socialist Czechoslovakia. Understanding this genealogy, moreover, is important for understanding the politics of austerity governing the present moment in the Czech Republic.

### Cruel Velvet Promises

The semantics of rehabilitation bequeaths us a language propelled by promises: promises of health, normalcy, functionality, and prosperity—all that seemed to be encapsulated in the early 1990s by the promise of the new social order and of capitalist democracy in post-socialist Czechoslovakia. Yet, as Laurent Berlant asserted, some promises are cruel. She cautions, “[w]here cruel optimism operates, the very vitalising or animating potency of an object/scene of desire contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment in the first place” (Berlant 24–25). In the following section, I trace more thoroughly how post-revolution euphoria transmuted into the form of affectivity Berlant terms “cruel optimism.” As I read these cruel velvet promises, my main interest is in drawing out the



ways in which people with disabilities identified with the “affective public” of post-socialist Czechoslovakia, thereby investing in visions of the promising future that proved cruel to crip horizons.

The most powerful promise is articulated through visions of reparation and overcoming the failings of the former regime. The change in regime brought hope of an end to “the long-standing rule of clichés, promises and unfulfilled demands and needs”; it generated the expectation that “*even in our Czechoslovakia, everyone with a health disability (zdravotním postižením) [will be able to] enjoy full rights*” (Váchalová n.p., emphasis added). In a letter to the then-prime minister, the Union of Invalids (Svaz Invalidů) claimed to be ready to cooperate with the government on their “shared mission” to remedy “the painful aspects of life in our state” and to ensure that “*every citizen of this country fe[els] content and happy*” (“Vážený pane ministerský předsedo,” 2, emphasis added). Interestingly, these visions seem to share the rehabilitative investment in the “assumed prior, assumed normal.” The moment of reparation is imagined as the moment when “the ideals of humanism *will again become* the inherent part of the [social] consciousness” (“El Rozhovor,” 1–2, emphasis added).

These statements exemplify that post-revolutionary euphoria and positivity are in truth a specific instance of “cruel optimism.” Perhaps, indeed, to go beyond Berlant, cruel optimism materializes even more rapidly in locations where capitalism had been least naturalized and thus could be (in the neoliberal era) more readily packaged as a supposed miracle cure for the failures of the past. Such a miracle cure would have you feeling yourself again in no time. Of course, regime change *could have been* a moment for renegotiation of visions of the social, yet these references to an idealized, phantasmatic, “assumed prior” no-place inhibited (crip) fantasies of different presents and futures. Furthermore, the grammar of rehabilitation is an ethical and moral discourse; curative logic always pairs optimism and euphoria with negative affects and bad feelings.

I want to examine this juxtaposition of promises alongside what I call an “affectivity of debt” to map out how promises were set against demands of overcoming and reparation of the failed, sick, disabled state (of being) of socialism. As darkly ironic as it is, the assuring and optimistic visions of good futures became the ways to curtail utopian visions, critical projects, and critical epistemologies. Petr Pithart said in the early 1990s, “We lived our lives on credit. [...] We have to realise that [...] *so frequently proclaimed ‘social securities’ and the living standard were secured at great costs.* [...] We lived above our means, on credit and this debt [...] needs to be paid off” (Pithart,

“Zpráva,” 10, emphasis added). The early 1990s were teeming with similar pronouncements (strangely, or perhaps predictably, similar comments have reappeared with eerie echoes in the present moment of austerity); they carried a notion of “debt” as the source of negative affects (shame, guilt, abjection) and, most importantly, contained a moral imperative. David Graeber summarizes the normative force of the modern idea of debt when he describes its “basic problem” as “the very assumption that debts *have* to be repaid” (3).

The need to “pay off” the debt of failed communism has become instrumental in articulating the moral imperatives that bound every citizen to the collectivity Berlant calls an “affective public,” a collectivity knit together both by a shared aspiration for an optimistic future, but also by the shared shame, guilt, and enforced responsibility for the past failure in the project of recuperation *into capitalism*. The statement of the first post-socialist government puts it laconically yet with shrilling clarity: “The *moral recovery* of the nation will not be possible without *wise social policy*” (Pithart, “Programové”).

These visions of sociality provide us with one tangible example of a promise transforming itself into a factor that actually inhibits thriving (of “the disabled”). The project of the rehabilitative transition was made synonymous with “paying off” the debts accumulated by “living on credit” or “living above *our* means”; “social securities” were satirized and put forth as the main source of the crisis. The notion of overextended credit contravened crip visions. The price for social belonging and the symbolic (self-)inclusion into the affective public was, in a cruel paradox, the impossibility of expressing any political demands that would reveal the violence of ableism. The moral weight of the “affectivity of debt” required that one’s critiques and demands be deferred and postponed:

It is impossible to change everything by a blink of an eye and *even we, the disabled, should be patient!* (Juřenová 82, emphasis added)

Do you not believe that this is *not* the most appropriate moment to [...] burden the state budget *further*? (“Náš mikrorozhovor ...” n.p., emphasis added)

It appears only too convenient—and illustrative of the cruelty of the post-socialist cure—that Klaus’s text vindicating a market-based vision of justice (“only the market relations will show us who really *deserves* what,” emphasis added), and tellingly entitled “The Chimera of Equality,” relies upon a complicated disability metaphor. Klaus likens equality to something “which is hoped for but is *illusory* or *impossible to achieve*” (OED, emphasis added). It is not a useless diversion to look up the figurative meanings of the *chimera*:

(2) “a fire-breathing female monster with a lion’s head, a goat’s body, and a serpent’s tail” [...]

(3) an organism containing a mixture of genetically different tissues, formed by processes such as fusion of early embryos, grafting, or mutation [...]

(4) a DNA molecule with sequences derived from two or more different organisms, formed by laboratory manipulation.

(5) (chimaera) a cartilaginous marine fish with a long tail, an erect spine before the first dorsal fin, and typically a forward projection from the snout.

All of these meanings call up visions of abnormality, monstrosity, and bodily difference—all of which are conceptually akin to disability. In fact, the chimera is itself a disability metaphor, a figuration of monstrosity, where references to abnormality and deviation from the “natural order” connote its impossibility. As Foucault elaborates in his lectures on the “abnormal,” the monster is a *mixture*, either a combination of the human and the animal, a mixture of forms, two species, or two sexes (55–56, 63). Defying unity and coherence of various sorts, the monster—the chimera—produces confusion that threatens to overthrow the natural order.

Under the weight of such significations, equality becomes a monstrosity that endangers both social and natural laws, and poses a threat to survival and (future) life. Conversely, inequality is legitimized as a natural part and an inevitable consequence of the healthy state/economy and the healthy result of rehabilitative recuperation. The full force of this diatribe against equality and the idea of social solidarity can be seen in the following comparison: “[social welfare is] only at the first sight less dangerous [than] inhuman *communist* and *social nationalist* [sic!] experiments” (Klaus, “Chiméra,” 1, emphasis added).

### Crippling Cruel Optimism

Echoing Sara Ahmed’s understanding of the future as “a question [that] unfolds [...] in the present” (*Promise*, 164), I want to come back to the questions that opened this article in order to ruminate on what it means to cruise a geopolitical time and place that apparently no longer exists. I want to ask what the vantage point crafted from the specific historical experience of socialism and the post-socialist transition offers to critiques of neoliberalism—more

specifically, to critiques formulated from cripistemological perspectives and what we might perceive as reorientations toward crip futures.

In engaging with these questions, I come back to Berlant's concept of cruel optimism, which has been extremely helpful as I identify structural attachments to promises of better futures that created the ideological base of the project of transition. The engagement with post-socialist material also shows, however, that Berlant's brilliant discussion of the toxicity of the neoliberal version of the promise of a good life needs, as I implied earlier, to be reformulated not only to correspond to the specificity of the particular experience of post-socialism, but also to reveal how such a confrontation brings forth more general challenges and lines of critique.

There is a strange incongruity in and around Berlant's book. Disability is literally on its cover, as the crip artist Riva Lehrer provided the cover image, *If Body: Riva and Zora in Middle Age*. It is embedded in the title of the book, as "cruel optimism" could in fact be a very appropriate name for the violent, recuperative, and compulsory optimism of the cultural logic of rehabilitation to which "the disabled" are permanently subjected. The book's discussions are haunted by disability, and at times it is even evoked directly, yet only through the clinical and medicalized language of "disease," "depression," "obesity," "spina bifida," rather than through the transformative and politicized vocabulary of cripness.

In this sense, Berlant's book replicates the failing of the majority of critical work that exposes the neoliberal debasement of the values of solidarity, social justice, and equity. This lack of discussion is startling. Indeed, how is it possible that the bulk of critiques of neoliberalism and neoliberal governmentality provides such engaging and incisive insights into the politics of maximizing vitality, capitalizing on the very act of living, or exposing the morbid utilization of "slow death" and the necropolitical distribution of death, yet does so without including disability/cripness in its analytical instrumentarium? How can a discussion of "the politics of life" itself do without a category that is integral to modern definitions of life and vitality? Taking up the one crip lead from the book, I speak to the image of *If Body* (approaching it differently to Berlant herself in her closing "Note on the cover image" [265–67]) and ask what a critique of cruel optimism would look like *if* it thought of *crip bodies*, *if* it thought of crip bodies *elsewhere* from the Western context, and *if* it thought of *crip existence in the context of post-socialist, neoliberal promises*.<sup>6</sup>

6. It is beyond the scope of this article to outline the import of the critical interrogations of "post-socialism." However, disability, again, rarely figures in these analyses. The work of scholars

In formulating the crip reading of cruel optimism, in *cripping* cruel optimism, we need to address the different affective structures of post-socialist promises. We also need to read those affective structures along with and perhaps against the relationality of cruel optimism Berlant first identified. Most importantly, the concept needs to be expanded so that its more capacious definition would account for the pressures of compulsory able-bodiedness and for the specific experiences of disabled people and crips. In other words, Berlant's concept of toxic and hurtful promises and her repertoire of critical analysis of fantasies of the good life call for encounters with crip versions of "life" as well as for a crippling of the notion of the "good life." They need to be read more carefully and closely along with the realities of lives that were never promised (let alone lived through) by this liberal fantasy, lives that are appropriated and colonized by images of "life not worth living," or lives that are at times not even granted the recognition of life itself.

The transition into neoliberalism produced forms of affective citizenship based on what Berlant calls "aspirational normativity" (164). In the post-socialist context, the aspiration promising the utopia of the "good life" was not expressed in the imperative to keep going; the moral aspiration of the post-socialist transition was by definition that of rehabilitation, overcoming the failure and shame of the bad past. It was not the "nearly utopian" (163–64) desire for a prolonged present, but the "nearly utopian" desire for a recuperative future.

The cruelty of the post-socialist moment lies—as I hope my analysis above unmasks—in conditioning forms of social belonging through an "affectivity of debt," discourses of overcoming, and fantasies of cure. The cultural grammar of rehabilitation saturated *the political* and *the social* so fully that claims to social equity could be disavowed and turned into a *chimera*, the crip monstrous ghost haunting the post-socialist redefinition of sociality and community, where any form of social belonging for crips other than under the rubrics of paternalizingly charitable humanism was (and remains) virtually impossible (see also Kolářová).

Registering the temporal coincidence of different structures of compulsory optimism also emphasizes their cruel irony. The project of rehabilitating the post-socialist crip virtually overlaps with the moment when, in the West, states started to retract their social welfare commitments. Even more specifically, the countries in "transition" served to uphold the fantasies of success, health, and the general "good life" made possible by capitalism. For instance, with the

such as Anastasia Kayiatos, Sarah Phillips, and Darja Zaviršek, to name just a few, represent a valued and important exception to this prevailing trend.

claims that it was living the “post-communist dream” (qtd. in Weiner 53), the Czech Republic was in the early 1990s (before the myth of smooth, straightforward, and successful transition was ruptured by the first crisis in 1994) put forth as the model for the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. The “teleology of ‘transition’” (Hann 9) of the post-socialist countries along the same path the West followed decades earlier (see also Verdery) also served, however, as an important projection space for the “West,” where the apparent rehabilitative capacity of capitalism in the East was utilized to bolster the “secular faith” (Duggan xiii) in (neoliberal) capitalism as the only possibility for human history. This did not go completely unnoticed, as the key figure of the Czech transformation, Václav Klaus, himself notes: “It is nearly paradoxical that the speeches of some of us [sic] delivered in the West are perceived not only as signs of the vital renaissance of thought in the East, but are also sought after as a support in their own ideological skirmishes” (Klaus, “Síla,” 1). Yet, in his ego-centrism, Klaus did not draw the conclusions at hand: that the project of rehabilitation/transformation in the “East” and its shock method helped to sustain the “West”—and at the same time inhibited the development of a critical crip consciousness in both locations.

### Imagining Crip Failures, Crip Horizons

The aspiration of post-socialism was progress, moral emancipation, and eventual happiness. I recall the quotation above that attempted to articulate the vision of the optimistic future as a moment when “every citizen of this country fe[els] content and happy” (Váchalová, 2). Yet, as Sara Ahmed cautions, happiness is a troubled notion. She asks, “What are we consenting to, when we consent to happiness?” and offers us a troubling answer: “perhaps the consensus that happiness is the consensus” (*Promise*, 1). Ahmed’s questioning of happiness as the normative horizon of our orientation resonates with the key issues that I address; the promise of happiness is a twin of “cruel optimism.” Most acutely, Ahmed’s critical discussion focuses on revealing how (the vision of and desire for) happiness participates in establishing structures of consensus, which are in fact structures of dominance. With (falsely) positive energy, recuperative logic said, “you should be happy communism is over”; the promise of happiness was used to justify the oppression of “the disabled” through ideologies of ableism constitutive to liberal individualism and liberal humanism.

The impossibility of seeing and envisioning crip(topias) in the situation of (post-)shameful identity illustrates not only the harmful and utterly disabling



work of certain affective attachments, it also and just as vividly illustrates the equally harmful impacts/effects of attachments to affects, in particular attachments to affects of positivity, affects seemingly necessary to foster self-embracing identity and subjectivity. In other words, the post-socialist crip challenges Western-developed theories of (disabled) identity that argue that positive affects are necessary to foster self-embracing and affirmative understandings of disability and disabled subjectivity. The symbolic violence embedded in recuperative positivity offers us the opportunity to think about crip failure and crip negativity. The violence also points toward conditions that (could) make (some forms of) failure useful for cripistemologies and that (could) map crip horizons.

Cripness *is* already rich with failure; cripness *is* infused with negativity that sustains. The crip negativity I plead for is a critical strategy rupturing ideologies of cure, rehabilitation, and overcoming, ideologies that inflict hurt and violence (not only) on crips. I wish to initiate a discussion about crip negativity as a political practice working toward (if never reaching) crip utopian horizons. Still, the post-socialist crip opens other and new questions about what crip failure would mean if it were to foster and sustain life, what forms of crip negative energies would allow for crip utopias and make possible the desire for crip survival.

J. Jack Halberstam's theory of failure elucidates how the compulsory positive nature of optimism, hope, pride, and success precludes the realization that failure can be a form of sustenance and strategy of critique/survival. In failing the normative prescriptions of compulsory heterosexuality (and able-bodiedness), failure "imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being" (88). Coming back to the image of the women failing/surviving with AIDS at the post-socialist Odessa hospice, failure also imagines signs of crip solidarity and sustenance where the visions of an optimistic future create spaces of abandonment for subjects who will never be offered a fantasy of the "good life."

Despite its lack of substantial attention to cripness that would surpass the level of metaphors, *The Queer Art of Failure* does offer some lines along which to think also about *crip* failures. The most helpful to the current analysis of post-socialist affects would seem to be Halberstam's discussion of the failure to remember. Forgetting, losing, and looping between past and future are the techniques of resistance to normative temporalities.

Such failures at temporalities of progressive and curative futurity, I argue, could offer forms of sustenance (for the post-socialist crip). The failure to remember would produce a rupture in the dominant narratives of shame (of a

failed socialism) and the futurity of “getting better.” It would forget visions of pride based on overcoming the failed socialist crip, and it would loosen/lose the compulsory vision of optimism of (neoliberal) humanism. It would forget the ideologies that we have seen hurt and violate crips and our futures. Crippling, disjuncting, the normative forms of (linear) knowing about the past-present-future, could offer resistance to the cruel hope that directs our desires into (an evacuated) future while foreclosing the negotiation of difficult yet important relationships, past and present.

The rejection of the curative and always already deferred future opens up a space for developing a more complicated relationship with failed pasts. Queer theorist Heather Love devises the politics of “feeling backwards/backwards feelings” as an affective strategy of resistance to liberal understandings of the “repressive hypothesis” and emancipation. Her concept is both a corrective to the deeply problematic progressivism of “gay pragmatism” with its compulsorily positive futurity of “getting better,” and an affective reaching backwards to legacies of difficult pasts. As she puts it, “[b]ackward feelings serve as an index to the ruined state of the social world; they indicate continuities between the bad gay past and the present; and they show up the inadequacy of queer narratives of progress” (27). I wish to add that they show up continuities between crip pasts and presents obscured by the undisputedly “good intentions” (McRuer, *Crip*, 110) of rehabilitation. Halberstam for his part appreciates the strategies of backward feeling as a way of recovering the past of queer and racially marked subjects erased in the tidy versions of the past: “[w]hile liberal histories build triumphant political narratives with progressive stories of improvement and success, radical histories must content with a less tidy past, one that passes on legacies of failure and loneliness as the consequence of [ableist] homophobia and racism and xenophobia” (98). To retrieve lives undone by ideologies of ableism, homophobia, racism and xenophobia, and practices of institutionalization, forced sterilization, ethnic segregation, and on and on, we need backward feelings.

The project of “reformulated histories” feels backwards to past forms of *crip survivals* and past experiences that have been erased (see also Kafer’s discussion of Halberstam 42–44). Alongside this move, I also want to “feel backwards” to the hurt caused by the shame of the bad past itself. This is not a naïve reclamation of the idealized communist past ignorant of the violence committed by the communist regime (violence and hurt inflicted on disabled people still remains mostly undocumented, unspoken, and unanalysed). What I argue is that the notion of the bad and failed past is too comfortable and too tidy and serves only the ideology of capitalist recovery that prescribes only one

version of futurity, a futurity—I argue—that is constructed upon the abjection of cripness. To open critical discussion I propose that we need to continue to produce untidy, crooked, queer, twisted, bent, crip versions of pasts. Only they will provide for more generous horizons of the present and future.

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