

Bodies on Display: Re-claiming Desire and Re-visiting Disability in Keah Brown's *The Pretty One*

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Abstract

The Paper aims to explore the conjunction of disability and desire, and how literature is changing the narrative through which people with disabilities are viewed in popular entertainment and society generally. Disabled bodies have to constantly experience othering in their lived experience and beyond the questions of basic access, lies the question of perception and desire; one that is steeped in viewing disability as a social construct, beyond the reach of the impairment itself. The chosen work entitled *The Pretty One* (2019), which is about the everyday life of a young black disabled woman who is in love with music and film and love itself, will be viewed through a pop culture-lens to analyse how disability is subliminally stereotyped in popular culture. The author - Keah Brown - seeks not to normalise disabled people of colour but to challenge the tropes that leave them on the margins of everyday experiences. Further, the Paper will examine the shifting movement wherein the disabled are claiming back their bodies from the dominant ableist discourse. Using the "Crip Theory" approach, the Paper will attempt to investigate how being desired and the act of re-affirmation through pleasure can serve as a way to counteract the shame toward disability and reject all that its social (besides the medical) model is concerned with. Hopefully it will serve as a forward step in finding authentic connections as it ties up with the intersectionality of disabled desire on the part of the author who is also a writer of colour.

Keywords: Crip Theory; Desire; Disability; Intersectionality; Race.

Introduction

Keah Brown's *The Pretty One* (2019) is an intimate and honest look at what it means to live at the intersection of womanhood, blackness and

disability. Through her twelve meticulously crafted essays, she explores the matter of representation of disabled people of colour in popular culture and the body politics surrounding the desire that disabled bodies are not allowed to wield as capriciously as their counterparts. In disability and race activism, there is a very important place for rage. Brown shows us that there is also a place for youth and playfulness and personal stakes too. The novelist is as clear-eyed about the nuances of many-fronted discrimination as any disability/race/gender intersectional activist. She is also aware of the injuries her life has inflicted on herself and her relationships. But she makes the political choice to tackle this pain and ugliness with cuteness, reclaiming herself against societal narratives that declare her not desirable enough.

This paper will examine *The Pretty One* through the lens of crip theory, exploring the ways in which the memoir challenges ableist and racist assumptions about disability and beauty. Drawing on the insights and perspectives of disabled people themselves, crip theory challenges ableist assumptions and seeks to reframe disability as a valuable and integral part of human diversity. The focus will be on how the memoir reclaims the concept of “the pretty one” as a means of celebrating the beauty and power of disabled bodies, challenging mainstream standards of beauty, and offering a new vision of disability and desire.

In *The Pretty One*, Brown reflects on her own experiences as a disabled woman. Through a close analysis as well as a critical engagement with key concepts and debates in crip theory, the paper will attempt to gain fresh perspectives on the intersections of disability, beauty, and identity.

Disability Studies

Disability studies is an interdisciplinary field of study that emerged in the late 20th century, drawing on insights and perspectives from sociology, anthropology, psychology, and other disciplines. The central aim of disability studies is to challenge ableist assumptions and reframe disability as a valuable and integral part of human diversity. By centering the experiences and perspectives of disabled people themselves, disability studies seek to transform the way we think about disability, identity, and social justice.

One of the key debates within the field is the distinction between the medical model of disability and the social model. The medical model views disability as a problem located within the individual, emphasising the need

for medical treatment and rehabilitation. In contrast, the social model recognizes that disability is not solely an individual medical problem, but is also created by social and cultural barriers that prevent full participation in society. This model thus emphasises the need for social and cultural change to eliminate these barriers and create a more inclusive society.

Another important model in disability studies is the cultural model, which recognizes that disability is shaped by cultural attitudes and beliefs. This model emphasises the need for cultural change to challenge and change negative attitudes toward disability and promote positive representations of it in art, literature, and other forms of cultural production. In addition, disability studies recognize the importance of intersectionality, the idea that disability intersects with other forms of identity and oppression, such as race, gender, and sexuality.

Crip Theory

Crip Theory is a term used to describe a framework for thinking about disability as a social and cultural phenomenon rather than just a medical condition. As an identity term rooted in Bay Area disability justice activism, crip is short for crippled, a term that was used in a derogatory way toward disabled folk, which was later reclaimed and used as a form of resistance against ableism, which is discrimination and prejudice against people with disabilities. It challenges the notion that disability is an individual problem that needs to be fixed by medical interventions. Instead, it argues that disability is a product of the social, cultural, and political contexts in which people live. This framework emphasises the importance of intersectionality, which means recognizing that people with disabilities are not a homogeneous group and that disability intersects with other forms of identity, such as race, gender, and sexuality, while also emphasising the importance of disabled people's agency and the need for them to be seen as active agents in their own lives rather than passive recipients of medical care or social services.

Overall, Crip Theory is a way of reframing disability as a cultural and social issue rather than an individual problem. The difference between critical disability theory, another important theory in disability studies, and crip theory is their focus. Critical disability theory tends to focus on the larger social, political, and economic structures that contribute to the marginalisation and exclusion of disabled people, whereas crip theory focuses more on the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of disability, including the ways in which disabled people can use art, humour, and other forms of

cultural production to resist ableism and promote their own empowerment. This is the reason why this paper will study the text by applying Crip Theory as Brown uses humour and the emerging space of social media as her way of fighting against ableism and promoting better representation. She was the creator of the #DisabledAndCute hashtag on Twitter, which has been widely used to promote positive images of disabled people and to challenge ableist beauty-standards.

Brown scored a publishing deal for her memoir after the social movement she created that challenged these stereotypes and reclaimed disabled bodies as sites of desire and pleasure, went massively viral. Through the campaign, she fought back against stigmatisation, benevolent discrimination and internalised shame and attempted to equip her community to do it in a way that let them feel empowered together.

Analysis

In the introduction to her memoir, Keah addresses the shame she felt as a child due to the way society around her emphasised the way she was supposed to feel as a disabled person: "...Yes, my insecurities were self-made, but they had been encouraged and influenced by a society that had taught me early on that I was not supposed to feel beautiful in a body like mine."

Even beyond direct ableism, the passive adherence that disabled people must not like their own bodies is a deeper shift that the cultural model of disability expounds upon. It suggests that society constructs disability as a negative deviation from the norm and associates it with physical or mental limitations, and views these limitations as detracting from one's beauty or desirability. Disabled folks are taught to hate themselves, dislike their bodies and disabilities in alignment with the existing mode for its narrow definition of attractiveness is based on able-bodied norms.

But under Crip Theory, there exists the concept of an "attractiveness," which emphasises the beauty and value of disabled bodies and challenges mainstream norms of beauty. It emphasises the need to celebrate the diversity of bodies and challenge ableist assumptions about what is considered attractive or desirable. Similar to how queer is used as a verb and identity both, wherein 'queering' a narrative means to look at the insights gained from applying a non-heteronormative perspective on a topic of discussion, *cripping* - as per crip theory- is used as a verb to explore an outlook wherein the discourse of/on able-bodiedness is not considered the mainstream, dominant narrative. For example, in her essay about

cripping performance art, Carrie Sandahl explores the crippling of performance art to challenge mainstream representation and reveal non-disabled assumptions and exclusionary effects instead.

Crippling beauty standards, and examining what they would be without capitalist, racist, ableist, cis-heteropatriarchal oppression systems, is what Brown does through both the hashtag, #DisabledandCute and her memoir. In the first essay, Brown begins by explaining her deep-set relationship with chairs, a necessary byproduct of her Cerebral Palsy needs. Through a light humorous tone, she names all the important chairs in her life. Vivian, the couch at her home; Paul, the movie theatre seat; and, Brandon, the economy seat in aeroplanes. Her relationship with these chairs, with herself and her Cerebral Palsy, is a complex one, but one that she deeply cherishes: "For every bit of frustration, self-consciousness, and agitation that my cerebral palsy brings me, for every moment that I am tired and out of breath, I remember that this cerebral palsy is mine." She has arrived at this point through much internalisation of the shame that disabled folks are subjected to. She writes, "I didn't appreciate almost any part of me growing up, but I appreciated every chair for providing my young body with solace."

But, as she grew up and engaged with the disabled community, and found her calling in activism, she realized that she alone could define her relationship with her cerebral palsy, without heeding the judgment and discrimination and isolation of the wider world: "We know each other like the back of our hands, and even when I catch myself wishing for the relief that would come in a body without CP, I stop and think of all the great people this body has given me the opportunity to know and all the great chairs that I have been able to sit in."

Her disability is a crucial part of her self-identity. Robert Mcurer, the author of *Crip Theory* - a seminal text - explains the able-bodied culture that the expectation of everybody wanting to be able-bodied reveals more about culture than the bodies being desired. The culture that encourages such questions as "Wouldn't you rather not have Cerebral Palsy?" assumes in advance that we all agree that able-bodied identities and perspectives are preferable and what we all, collectively, are aiming for. A system of compulsory able-bodiedness repeatedly demands that people with disabilities embody for others an affirmative answer to the unspoken question, "Yes, but in the end, wouldn't you rather be more like me?"

This expectation of a "compulsory able-bodied culture" - a term inspired

by compulsory heterosexuality - is bound to fail. Judith Butler explains: "The "reality" of heterosexual identities is performatively constituted through an imitation that sets itself up as the origin and the ground of all imitations. In other words, heterosexuality is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealisation of itself – and failing. Precisely because it is bound to fail, and yet endeavours to succeed, the project of heterosexual identity is propelled into an endless repetition of itself." (?) Mcruer argues that similar to the way compulsory heterosexuality fails, compulsory able-bodiedness is bound to fail as well since the ideal able-bodied identity can never, once and for all, be achieved. Crip theory takes Butler's queer theories of gender performativity and reinscribes it within disability studies. Able Bodiedness is not the norm, nor the ideal to be achieved for one singular, perfect definition of it cannot exist in the first place and the constant striving to achieve it is a failing endeavour of attempting to maintain a flawed hegemony.

In her second essay, Brown takes up her experience of growing up alongside an able-bodied twin sister, the differing treatment they received by the society around them and also the desperate jealousy she grew up with: "I didn't understand why she wasn't constantly dating or using her "perfect" able-bodied body the way that I would have. Leah was single because she wanted to be, while I felt I had no other choice. This lack of choice made me angry.." Her anger at Leah is a reflection of the inferiority she felt within herself due to her disability that she wasn't taught or allowed to accept: .

The third essay is less about her personal life and goes into deeper detail about the lexicon used around disabilities: "I am a black disabled woman. I am not handicapable, differently abled, special needs, or any other iteration of disabled that says anything but the word disabled. When I say as much, I am speaking for myself and myself alone. My thoughts on the matter are not the case for every person with disabilities, because we are not monolithic."

Susan Wendell, in her book entitled, *The Rejected Body* (1977), mentions that definitions of disability affect people's self-identity. When it comes to the correct terminology and the necessity for it, opinions vary among different subsections. Brown herself rejects any other term than 'disabled' but also accommodates for the fact that she cannot represent the entire disabled community. The term 'Person with Disability' or PWD is another that gets much traction in the current evolutionary stage of the field. In her paper, 'What's in a name?' Lynch argues that "names, and the ability

to name, are inherently political due to the power relations involved and the discourses and actions they facilitate and hinder..” Those that prefer the terminology of Person with Disability argue that it allows for ‘Person first language’ allowing for a perspective where personhood is put first and their disability does not define their identity. Others propose terms like ‘differently abled’ contending that the term ‘disabled’ has been linked with a sense of incompleteness, through its linguistic foundation with the prefix ‘dis’ that with its Latin roots stands for ‘having a privative, negative, or reversing force.’

She further argues that disability is a social construct, which reflects in multiple ways ranging from social conditions, and physical functioning, to less outwardly cultural factors that have, for years, determined what qualified as normal and therefore acceptable and what qualified as abnormal and was therefore excluded.

Brown is a proponent of a similar sentiment. She grew up without the terminology of disability discourse as she rejected anything that she thought made her the ‘other’: “What I spent most of my life with is internalised ableism. I fed into those prejudices and believed them to be true.” But once she was involved within the community, she realised the significance and power that owning identifiers gave her: “There is a point to prove to people who don’t think that we should care so much about identity. These days, there is all this rhetoric about how identity politics is ruining things but not enough about how satisfying and how affirming identity and identifiers (a way to name the identities one person associates with) make communities of people who would be considered invisible otherwise. After years spent trying to avoid any conversation surrounding my disability, I want the world to know that I am disabled and proud.”

Brown acknowledges that the nature of disability and the idea of diagnosis are changing, and the language and definitions used when talking about disability reflect the shifting power structures. Disabled, in the eyes of many, still remains a dirty word because it reeks of the prevalent oppressive systems and, so, needs people to recognize their privileges. She advocates the use of identifiers because there is power in that when used by disabled people themselves. Wendell too mentions the power structures when it comes to the need for defining disability but from the other side of the equation. According to her, defining disability and identifying individuals as disabled are also social practices that involve the unequal exercise of power and can have major economic, social, and psychological consequences in some people’s lives. Both champion that in order to un-

derstand how the power of definition is exercised and experienced, one has to ask who does the defining in practice as well as spell out for what purposes and with what consequences for those who are deemed to fit the definition.

Crip theory similarly advocates the use of identifiers in language to signify pride in disabled identity and push back against normative ideals: “What I want to make sure I tell you, and what I will continue to tell people across publications, podcasts, and TV interviews, is that disabled is not a dirty word. Say it with me, please. Disabled is not a dirty word.. The flipping of power dynamics when the decision to ‘other’ oneself is taken away from the ones with privilege, and used as a means of asserting self-identity, is a significant act of resistance: “Disabled people deserve the chance to choose how we identify, because with identity comes power – more accurately, the ability to take our power back from the people who took it away in the first place. Identity and identifiers mean freedom. We are free from the expectations of others when we choose to be fully who we are and choose how to label ourselves.”

Critical queer theory aims to analyse and deconstruct societal norms surrounding sexuality and gender identity. The theory suggests that heterosexuality is only possible because of the existence of queerness, which is seen as abnormal due to its non-normative nature. Additionally, the social definition of heterosexuality is based on a binary and fixed understanding of gender, where men hold privileged gender identities relative to women. These assumptions have become so fundamental to society that they are enforced through mechanisms such as stigma and law enforcement actions. Crip theory, a critical disability perspective, builds on precisely these ideas by highlighting the ways in which able-bodiedness is also a compulsory force in society that reinforces compulsory heterosexuality. Both critical queer theory and crip theory emphasise the importance of acknowledging non-dominant identities like “the queer” and “the crip,” which serve as discursive spaces rather than fixed identities based on a particular sexuality, gender, and/or disability status. These identities can be constructed in various ways, often using signs and symbols appropriated from a society that does not value them but are repurposed to fit the self-styling of those who reclaim them.

In her fifth essay, Brown talks about the representation disabled people are offered in popular culture and the way it affects their own self-esteem and relationship with their respective disability: “Because I realised what I wasn’t seeing: disabled bodies. Like it or not, popular culture shapes the

way we see the world, each other, and ourselves. Popular culture shifts and shapes the conversations around disability, and for so long, disability has been associated with shame and anger, shock and horror. There are films like *Me Before You* and *Million Dollar Baby* that insist we would rather die than live..." Representation is crucial in creating an inclusive society wherein individuals feel respected and represented, regardless of their identity. It provides an accurate depiction of a community's diversity and everyone in the community should be able to see themselves reflected in it. Representation in media can break down stereotypes, provide positive role models, increase self-esteem, build connections, give a voice to marginalised groups, normalise inclusion, increase representation in leadership, create positive role models, promote understanding, inspire creativity, and educate the public. It can also lead to more equitable and inclusive policies in decision-making.

This is what Brown, as a screenwriter herself, addresses: "What are disabled people supposed to feel when we continue not to see ourselves in these stories? When we don't see our stories in the way we deserve, because we are not in the writers' room, our absence ensuring that our stories are not even a thought?"

The significance of representation lies in its impact on how individuals perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others. Negative stereotypes are present in all identities, but for Black people, these stereotypes have permeated through popular culture, resulting in their one-dimensional portrayal in mainstream media. However, recent films such as *Black Panther*, *Moonlight*, and *A Wrinkle in Time* demonstrate that stories featuring Black people can be financially successful and provide positive representation too. These stories showcase the diverse experiences and contributions of Brown who argues that Black people should not be limited to stories of pain and hardship, but rather should share stories of joy and success as well. The current focus on trauma in Black stories suggests that only their pain is acceptable to a wide-ranging audience, but progress means recognizing the importance of finding joy in life despite systemic oppression.

A term used in crip theory is "inspiration porn," which refers to the objectification and commodification of disabled bodies for the purpose of making able-bodied people feel good about themselves. This term was coined by the disability activist and writer, Stella Young. Inspiration porn typically features images or stories of disabled people who are depicted as heroic or inspiring simply because of their disability, rather than for their

actual achievements or qualities. This type of representation perpetuates the idea that disabled people exist solely to inspire and uplift able-bodied people, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and completely obliterating the complexity of disabled lives.

Furthermore, inspiration porn often reinforces the notion of able-bodied superiority and pity towards disabled individuals, emphasising their "otherness" and suggesting that they are somehow less capable or deserving of respect and autonomy. This not only further marginalises disabled people but also ignores the systemic barriers and discrimination they face in society. Brown is firm when it comes to denying able-bodied people a chance at telling their stories for them: "I am still my only full representation. I have yet to see a black disabled woman in mainstream media. That is why I do this work."

In her sixth essay titled, 'You can't cure me, I promise it is fine.' Brown talks about all the unsolicited cures, advice and faith-systems that have been pushed in her direction "Because disability is not monolithic and we should be seen as human beings with our own autonomy, disabled people deserve the ability to live our everyday lives without the reminder that the world is not comfortable with the way we look, without having to navigate the world or the belief that we should want to change it and accept any and all suggestions from complete strangers." The concept of a "cure" for disability is deeply rooted in the medical model and has been criticised by disability rights activists and scholars. The pursuit of a cure often implies that there is something inherently wrong or defective about disabled bodies and minds and that disabled people must be fixed to fit into a normative, able-bodied society. This approach ignores the valuable contributions and experiences of disabled people and, instead, reinforces stigma and discrimination. Disability studies have reproached the clinical and generalized way disabled bodies are examined and the negative connotation of finding a 'cure' and instead there is an active push towards a 'care' approach, wherein individualised treatment and palliative care is planned so as to suit the needs and wants of disabled folks according to their own will.

Rather than focusing on a cure, *crip theory* promotes an approach which involves the liberation and celebration of disabled bodies and minds. This approach recognizes disability as a form of diversity that is just as valid and valuable as any other form of identity, and calls for the dismantling of societal barriers that prevent disabled people from living fully and authentically. Brown's goal – as she engaged with activism – changed from

a cure to rights and wellness – which all disabled people deserve without question.

This ‘crip cure’ thus involves a shift in focus from individualised “fixes” for disabled people to systemic changes that address the root causes of disability exclusion. This includes increasing accessibility in public spaces, employment, education, and healthcare, as well as challenging harmful stereotypes and attitudes towards disabled people. By prioritising inclusion and access for the disabled, crip theory aims to create a more just and equitable society for all.

The Theory also intersects with discussions of desire and sexuality, challenging the ableist assumptions that people with disabilities are not sexual beings or are not capable of experiencing desire. This representation not only erases disabled people’s sexuality and desire but also reinforces ableist stereotypes that view disabled bodies as undesirable and deficient. Crip Theory, on the other hand, recognizes that disabled people have the same desires and sexualities as the non-disabled ones. It challenges the notion that desire is solely a physical experience and highlights the importance its emotional and social dimensions.

This is what Brown, in her titular seventh essay, maintains “As a black disabled woman, I know that there is much to improve on in my personal life and in the world at large. There are people in the world who have gone all their lives without seeing themselves represented and without feeling like they have the ability to be and feel beautiful.” Brown mentions that it is often said for those people that they have become too greedy and that they are asking for too much. The declaration that more and better is being asked for is made by people who completely forget what it felt like for them to feel invisible only months and years earlier. According to her, true change cannot be achieved by stopping at the inclusion of ourselves; it has to be strived for by everyone because no one should feel like who they are is not enough:

“I still long to see myself and my body on their covers and in their pages, celebrated by a world ready to embrace and respect disabled bodies.”

Historically, disabled bodies have been excluded from mainstream discussions of sexuality and desire, and have been subject to harmful stereotypes and stigmatisation. Disabled people are often depicted as asexual, unattractive, and incapable of sexual desire or activity. Tepper in their work ‘Sexuality and Disability’ writes that the acceptance of desire as a productive force in discourses is significant because it can serve to em-

power people with disabilities as 'sexual agents', entitled to pleasure and therefore responsible for their own sexuality.

These ableist views deny the reality of disabled people's sexual lives and desires and perpetuate harmful myths about disability. In their paper, Loeser and Crowley postulate that the socio-pathologization of disabled bodies as abnormal Other and functional deficits has further led to render these bodies hypervisible (and hypersexual) or, by contrast, invisible (and nonsexual) in both lay consciousness and the social every day. It appeared to them that to construct new ways of seeing and hearing subjects of disability and sexuality as desiring and desirable beings, there is a need to shift the gaze of the mainstream beyond the hierarchical double-bind of one and its 'Other'

It is their right to exist in a space that doesn't infringe on their agency to feel just as beautiful, pretty, cute or any other synonyms associated with being desirable as able-bodied people.. As the world campaigns to recognise the harm that able-bodied beauty standards inflict upon other bodies - bodies that are not white, cis, thin and able - successive generations ought to acknowledge that without the forceful shoving of such limiting standards, the baseline of attraction would not be as narrow and bigoted in the first place. And, the way to battle these imposed standards lies in affirmative action.

Conclusion

This paper has ultimately tried to draw from Brown's lived experiences as a black disabled woman with the support of Crip Theory's intersectional approach to solidify insights such as the isolation that disabled people of color face within their own communities, and the alienation they feel within larger disability activism circles and academia at their lack of representation. This results in internalized shame, an inability to find the correct terminology and access to necessary support systems, a sine qua non for holistic development. Brown battles this scarcity her entire life.

Battling internalized shame and inferiority, Brown has emerged a leading voice in disability activism circles. Her narratives highlight the importance of acknowledging and owning one's disabled identity, challenging dominant societal norms, and advocating for a more inclusive and equitable society. Through light hearted, accessible language, she brings the discourse to the tables of her own community and people instead of elitist echo chambers.

Brown's essays ultimately present their contribution to the critical discourse on disability studies and crip theory by highlighting the intersections of disability, race, gender, and sexuality and the need for a more nuanced understanding of identity and power.

Crip theory itself is indebted to cultural studies, feminist and queer theory, and so unlike materialist models of looking at disability that tend to conform to ideological regressiveness, it looks at disability as beyond an impairment and with all the beholdings of a social construct.

Robert Mcurer points out that we are rising out of the previous era of binary definitions, such as other and not, normal and abnormal, ability and disability. Ultimately Brown's work establishes itself as a beacon of light, calling out and validating other disabled women of color and as we recognise ourselves along a spectrum, theory too needs to evolve and accommodate for all fragments of identities.

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