

# Trans/Criptions

## *Gender, Disability, and Liturgical Experience*

MAX THORNTON

**Abstract** Phenomenological theology can provide a helpful reframing of the bodily rituals of transgender and disabled experience, embracing the ways in which they waste time and energy and sacralizing this waste as a microtactic of resistance to oppression and a site for the in-breaking of the transcendent in the everyday. Using Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's model of the misfit, trans and disabled experience can be understood as a temporal misfitting under the cis and abled norms of neoliberal capitalism, which seeks to contain, suppress, or eliminate their inefficient, flexible, and waste time. A coalitional politics of trans/crip misfitting must resist the capacitating imperatives of normative time, instead leaning into the rupture created by trans/crip time as a space-time of potentiality and openness to alterity. The theological thought of Jean-Yves Lacoste can help frame the little rituals and bodily practices of trans and crip life as de Certeauvian microtactics that embody resistance to the coercions of neoliberal capitalism and, through their very frustration and difficulty, as sites of possibility for true liturgical experience.

**Keywords** disability, theology, transgender, crip theory

**This blessing may be recited before any moment in the transitioning process:**

*Baruch Ata Adonai Eloheinu Melech Ha'Olam Ha'Mavir L'Ovrin*

Blessed are You, Eternal One, our God, Ruler of Time and Space, the Transforming  
One to those who transform/transition/cross over

**Afterward recite:**

*Baruch Ata Adonai Eloheinu Melech Ha'Olam sh'asani b'tzelmo*

Blessed are You, Eternal One, our God Ruler of Time and Space who has made me  
in God's image

—Eli Kukla, "A Blessing for Transitioning Genders"

Phenomenological theology can provide a helpful reframing of the bodily rituals of transgender and disabled experience, embracing the ways in which they waste time and energy and sacralizing this waste as a microtactic of resistance

to oppression and a site for the in-breaking of the transcendent in the everyday. Using Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's model of the misfit, trans and disabled experience can be understood as a temporal misfitting under the cis and abled norms of neoliberal capitalism, which seeks to contain, suppress, or eliminate their inefficient, flexible, and waste time. A coalitional politics of trans/crip misfitting must resist the capacitating imperatives of normative time, instead leaning into the rupture created by trans/crip time as a space-time of potentiality and openness to alterity. The theological thought of Jean-Yves Lacoste can help frame the little rituals and bodily practices of trans and crip life as de Certeauvian microtactics that embody resistance to the coercions of neoliberal capitalism and, through their very frustration and difficulty, as sites of possibility for true liturgical experience.

### Trans/Crip Misfits

If, as Susan Stryker (2004) suggests, trans theory is queer theory's "evil twin," crip theory might be considered disability studies' evil twin. Transgender studies disrupts the gender categories that make possible discussions of sexuality as we know them, such that queer theory is always already doing transgender studies, whether this is acknowledged or not. Crip theory similarly contests the very terms within which disability studies takes place, troubling definitions and attending to contradictions. Crip theory is always already doing queer theory as well. As Robert McRuer (2002: 97) notes, "Compulsory heterosexuality is intertwined with compulsory able-bodiedness; both systems work to (re)produce the able body and heterosexuality." McRuer's usage of *heterosexuality* here means "legible, cisgender heterosexuality"—to be visibly heterosexual, one must first be visibly and unambiguously gendered as either male or female. So "trans/crip" is my attempt to name something that is always already going on, though rarely specifically identified: the inextricable entwinement of gender normativity and able-bodiedness, and hence also the entwinement of gender nonconformity and disability. Additionally, compulsory gender normativity and compulsory able-bodiedness are coconstituted and coimplicated in the perpetuation of neoliberal capitalism. The two are, to use McRuer's (2006: 2) terms, not only "interwoven" but "contingent on" one another in ways that are enforced by the systems of capitalism. Gender-normative heterosexuality and able-bodiedness intertwine as a mechanism for efficiency, production, and reproduction.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's concept of misfit is useful for thinking gender and disability together in light of the demands of capitalism. Misfit is Garland-Thomson's (2011: 592) attempt to think beyond the constraints of both the medical and social models of disability, turning to material feminism for "an account of a dynamic encounter between flesh and world." *Misfit* refers to "how the particularities of embodiment interact with their environment in its broadest

sense, to include both its spatial and temporal aspects” (592)—locating disability neither in the body alone nor exclusively in social barriers, but in the relationship between body and environment. The misfit model is expansive enough to account for the multifarious ways in which disability manifests, including the ways that defy easy categorization. Similarly, it is useful to think of “gender misfits” as a category that spans all those—trans or otherwise—whose gender presentation or identity causes them to experience “the discrepancy between body and world, between that which is expected and that which is, [which] produces fits and misfits” (593). A butch cis lesbian, an AFAB (assigned-female-at-birth) nonbinary person, and a trans woman may have different gender practices, feelings, and identities, but all are put at risk when the usage of women’s restrooms is policed. Misfit is not an ontological category but a relational one, and specifically one imbricated in relationships of power: who “fits” in an environment depends on whom that environment was made for and who is expected to be there as it is rebuilt and remade. Misfit is what Alexandre Baril (2015) refers to as a composite model, one that refuses the stifling binary of medical or social models of disability, and as such it is particularly useful for conceptualizing trans/crip in a way that accounts for the coincidence of transness and disability in many of the same bodies, whether due to the debility of transness itself and/or the coexistence of unrelated disability. Trans/crip misfitting encompasses both social and bodily experiences, both systemic and individual failures to fit, but it is phenomenologically irreducible to these two categories.

The temporal misfitting of trans/crip bodies is my specific interest here. Baril has identified at least three important ways in which trans/crip experience is a temporal misfitting.<sup>1</sup> Most obviously, trans/crip time is inefficient—things take longer (for both social-systemic and individual bodily reasons). Trans/crip time is also fluid and flexible, speeding up and slowing down, out of sync with the rhythms of normative time (Baril 2017). And trans/crip time is considered wasted time, lost time, dead-end time with no future (Baril 2016: 161–62). Each of these three forms of temporal misfitting presents a challenge to the chrononormative (Freeman 2010) operations of compulsory cisheterosexual ability.

The inefficiency of both trans and crip time is the most well-documented of these forms of temporal misfitting. In Alison Kafer’s (2013: 26) words, “Crip time involves an awareness that disabled people might need more time to accomplish something or to arrive somewhere.” The extra time “might result from a slower gait, a dependency on attendants . . . , malfunctioning equipment . . . , a bus driver who refuses to stop for a disabled passenger, or an ableist encounter with a stranger that throws one off schedule.” Similarly, Kate Bornstein (1995: 87) writes that “a newly transgendered person . . . moves just a bit slower than most people; he or she is unlearning old ways of moving, and picking up new ways of moving.”

Baril (2017) develops this connection, describing a double meaning of *crip time* as both the subjective experience of time slowed and the sociopolitical experience of barriers imposed by a society that is not adapted to the needs of people whose actions are slower than the norm. It is not only our actions that (may) take longer, as we bind and tuck flesh, learn to move in new ways, wait for the accessible bathroom stall to become available; but we also lose time to social, legal, and bureaucratic requirements, educating others about our needs and obtaining necessary paperwork (Baril 2016: 161). There is certainly tremendous pain and frustration in this inefficiency, particularly those aspects that result from ableism and cisnormativity; but might there also be potential for a certain satisfaction or even pleasure?—the pleasure of taking longer over ordinary tasks, approaching them with special care and deliberateness, as well as the satisfaction of (even momentarily) gumming up the works of a ruthless chrononormative capitalist system that tries to foreclose all possibility of inefficiency, of slowness, of meandering?

Meandering is, after all, an essential part of the *trans/crip* temporal experience. There is flux and fluidity, inherent instability, within the *trans/crip* body. Variety within and across disabled experience is widely attested: uncertainty about what you will be able to do from one day to the next is a common experience for people with disabilities, chronic illness, degenerative conditions, and mental illness, even as the rigid temporal demands of neoliberal capitalist time attempt to demand strict regularity and predictability. Both *crip* and *trans* time eddy and whorl, unspooling athwart the lockstep march of normative time. Baril (2017) catalogs some of the ebb and flow of *trans* time: feelings of impatience for changes to come, a sense of time lost or regained, the time travel of a second puberty in adulthood, the accelerated time of having to adjust to new social roles and environments. Transition can make relating to one's own past and present complicated—not necessarily more complicated than it is for anyone else, but more obviously so: transition makes manifest the universal truth of constant change. Bodies change; self-understandings change; how bodies relate to their (changing) environments changes—an inconvenient truth for the ceaseless demands of normative time. *Trans/crip* experience unmasks the illusion of static selfhood and unveils the reality of time's inherent instability, of the uncertainty of all futures. Dividing up life into regularized, measurable, repetitive intervals can never eradicate the phenomenological fact that the length of a minute varies wildly, depending which side of the bathroom door you're on, or if there is even a bathroom that is accessible or safe for you to use.

The slowness and flexibility of *trans/crip* time mark it as waste time, time that is “lost, expensive, and unproductive, both in the capitalist, neoliberal sense of the word and in terms of reproduction” (Baril 2016: 162). The logic of capitalism

has no use for the misfit, with the material consequence of poverty, suffering, and even premature death for large numbers of trans and disabled people. A trans/crip future is unthinkable under normative time, in which the only possible future is one of rehabilitation: “All bodies are being evaluated in relation to their success or failure in terms of health, wealth, progressive productivity, upward mobility, enhanced capacity” (Puar 2017: 15). Trans/crip bodies are required “to integrate into a capitalist economy as productive bodies,” which must be done through “rehabilitation, cure, and concealment” (45). This integration occurs through the expulsion or suppression of certain trans/crip bodies, and the simultaneous exceptionalization of other trans/crip bodies as the supercrip or the “new transnormative citizen” who embodies a certain kind of neoliberal futurity (46). The capacitating of some trans people, most often white, well-off transmasculine people, depends on the abjection of other trans people, most often poor trans women of color.

Under normative time, the only possible trans future is one in which “the body as an ability-machine takes its place among other forms of for-profit capital” (14). Trans/crip time rehabilitated is no longer trans/crip time but the assimilation of the few at the expense of the many.

A coalitional trans/crip time of misfitting must resist this kind of rehabilitation and capacitation—without, however, discounting the pain and suffering of the misfit. Refusing to become an ability-machine must not entail either dismissing or glorifying the pain of misfitting, rushing to either assign it meaning or refuse it any possibility of meaning. Instead, we must try to hold open misfitting as a space-time of potential, but by no means guaranteed, irruption of alterity into daily life; and for this I turn to liturgical theology.

### Liturgical Experience

How might liturgical theology be useful for holding open the potentiality of trans/crip misfitting? Religious traditions are chock-full of less than satisfactory treatments of misfits, even when attempting to respond positively. Trans and disabled people are all too familiar with well-meaning but harmful discourses of inclusion that ultimately seek only to assimilate misfit into existing power structures: inspiration porn, the supercrip, the capacitation of the individual exceptional body. In religious contexts, this has often been especially troublesome. Uncritical readings of Levitical purity codes and Gospel healing narratives have fostered a suspicion of disability and a unilateral focus on healing, oblivious of the ambivalent relationship many disabled people have with the whole idea of healing and cure (for an example, see Clare 2017). Attempts to rehabilitate gender misfits in the Abrahamic traditions, meanwhile, often place a wildly overcorrective emphasis on the special spiritual gifts of queer people, which is its own version

of inspiration porn. Perhaps a less excess-prone response would begin with Michel de Certeau's (1984) microtactics of resistance, emphasizing the political and theological potential of misfit ritual.

The inefficiency of trans/crip misfit experience has a fascinating theological parallel in the work of Jean-Yves Lacoste, the French phenomenological theologian who uses the term *liturgical experience*. *Liturgical experience* denotes not merely the specific instance of worship in church liturgy but, as Joeri Schrijvers (2012: 2) puts it, "all the acts and all the deeds a human being does or does not do when confronting the Absolute, or in Lacoste's words, 'the logic that presides over the encounter between man and God writ large.'" Lacoste emphasizes the uselessness of liturgical experience, its rupture with the world, and its reorientation toward time—all aspects that share with trans/crip experience a refusal to be assimilated to the dictates of efficiency, productivity, and reproduction.

For Lacoste, "liturgical experience's first word is that of dispossession" (Schrijvers 2012: 19). The liturgical experience is a phenomenological understanding of the religious sensibility that is always attentive to space, place, body, and being-in-the-world; but it is also always about frontiers, margins, and the limits of being-in-the-world. Liturgy is a transgression of ordinary modes of being, a nonexperience or nonevent in nonplace and nontime. All these aspects that are "nonned" in liturgy—experience, event, place, time—are ordinary aspects of being that are upended, ruptured, perhaps even queered or crippled. The trans/crip body concretizes Lacoste's view of liturgical rupture and marginalization. Rupture of being-in-the-world does not mean ceasing to be part of the world, and trans/crip bodies make this very clear: even as they rupture time and place by their very existence, trans and crip bodies demand a world in which their material, social, and psychological needs are attended to. The trans/crip rupture is simultaneously the "precarious, fragile and inchoative" (139) rupture of liturgical experience and a call for concrete change in the world at large.

The trans/crip reorientation to time also has a counterpart in liturgical experience. Being-in-the-Church is being in a nonplace and a nontime, a "fragile anticipation" where we "live in a presence as if—but only as if—this presence were the Parousia" (37, 58). It is not that the one dwelling in nontime is outside time but that she or he "attempts to thwart the worldly laws of temporalization": "It is a question here of liturgy's ambitions, of the meaning it gives itself and not of its empirical reality" (83). Liturgical nontime—a marginal time, a time of night and vigil—is a time in which the present or historical and the future or eschatological are brought together, a temporal paradox in which "the ultimate simultaneously unsettles all present experience and nevertheless allows all present experience to be an anticipation of the ultimate" (188). Trans/crip time, too, unsettles the present, attempts to thwart chrononormativity, and invokes the

future—denying the future (Edelman 2004), orienting itself toward the future (Muñoz 2009), or perhaps holding the two in fruitful tension.

Moreover, from the perspective of ordinary being-in-the-world, both liturgy and the trans/crip body are absolutely useless. Individuals' social value is calculated in terms of their productivity, both of labor and of future laborers, and "both queers and crips [are] rendered unnatural, sick, degenerate, and deviant" (Kafer 2013: 45). The degenerate is a failure of (re)production and must be excluded from the logic of usefulness and efficiency. Similarly, the cumulative hours spent in contemplation of the same theological mysteries, repetition of the same words, consumption of the same bread and wine—it has no visible purpose. And yet, as Lacoste (1984: 33) says, "Being capable of liturgy is first of all being accustomed to losing one's time, in any case to distract one's time from all economy of means and ends." Liturgy is definitionally incapable of reduction to use, to the question of "what can I get out of this?" Liturgical experience will not be reduced to an economy of means and ends, to a cold calculation of profit and loss. It is proudly useless, a nonuseful nonexperience that refuses the logic of capitalism. Lacoste does not go so far as to state explicitly that the uselessness of liturgical nonexperience is a countercapitalist challenge, but it is not a great leap from his uplift of uselessness to an all-out refusal of capitalism.

In fact, the elevation of uselessness might prove to be one strategy for resisting capitalist coercion, exploitation, and oppression. In a context of ruthless economism, in which a price can be put on every life and resource, it is profoundly radical to "waste [your] time" on "a space where, apparently, nothing happens," on "an empty and even a dead time" (Schrijvers 2012: 91, 92). The liturgical nonexperience occurs, perhaps, in a queer time and place, a time and place for "subcultural practices, alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiment, and those forms of representation dedicated to capturing these willfully eccentric modes of being" (Halberstam 2005: 1). Trans/crip misfit uselessness and liturgical uselessness could unite to resist the terrorist tactics of global neoliberal capitalism.

### Trans/Criptions

What might it look like to embrace the useless nontime of trans/crip liturgical experience? How can the union of trans/crip experience and liturgical experience challenge the dehumanizing discourses and policies of compulsory heterosexuality, compulsory able-bodiedness, and the global capitalism that coconstitutes and complicates them?

I suggest that it begins by seeing this union as a two-way street, a process that serves both to queer and crip liturgical experience and to sacralize the daily bodily rituals of the trans/crip experience. Again, *liturgical experience* does not refer only to explicitly religious or sacred rituals, but to any experience that

involves humanity “confronting the Absolute”—any experience that brings a person face-to-face with the existential: with mortality, with ethics, with the meaning of life and the horizon of death. As such, to trans/crip liturgical experience means to imbue these questions with a profound awareness of trans/crip lives and bodies and their material needs. Wherever a liturgical experience takes place—in a house of worship, a hospital, a political protest—a trans/crip consciousness must be asking, Is there a place here for trans/crip bodies and lives? Systemic forces of compulsory gender normativity, heterosexuality, and able-bodiedness keep trans and disabled people in poverty; restrict their access to jobs, housing, and medical care; and elevate their trauma and abuse. Trans and crip lives are under constant existential threat, and trans/cripping liturgical experience entails recognizing this and attempting to change it.

Equally, the sacralizing of trans/crip experience opens a space for change in the daily lives of trans and disabled people. Mundane events and places in the trans/crip life can be viewed no longer as inconveniences or impediments to normative functioning but as a deliberate rupture to the economy of means, ends, profits, and loss. Rather than apologizing for, correcting, or eliminating the wasted time of trans/crip experience—the buses slowed down by taking a wheelchair passenger on board, the days of work lost to poor mental health, the lengthy search for a gender-neutral restroom—we might consecrate this wasted time, this uselessness, these ruptures in the fabric of capitalism. Consecration entails a mindful embrace of these mundanities, a self-conscious performance with an attitude of resistance to the forces that seek to assimilate or eliminate trans and crip lives.

I propose *trans/cription* as a name for this conscious performing of the liturgies of being trans/crip to resist the scripts of capitalist chrononormativity. Trans/crip rituals include taking our daily medications, taking our weekly hormone injections, binding and tucking our flesh, strapping on prostheses, attending physio- or psychotherapy, waiting for elevators, stopping the bus for the slow raising and lowering of the chair lift—these are the rituals of knowing oneself and knowing one’s body. An example of trans/cription is found in Rabbi Eli Kukla’s “Blessing for Transitioning Genders,” with which this piece began. Kukla (2006) writes:

Jewish tradition teaches us that we should be saying a hundred blessings a day to mark all the moments of kedusha, holiness, that infuse our lives. There are blessings to recite before eating and drinking, performing religious commandments, witnessing rainbows, oceans, thunder or lightning, seeing old friends, tasting new fruits and arriving at a new season. And yet many of the most important moments in the lives of transgender, intersex and gender queer Jews are not honored within our tradition.



I wrote this blessing for a friend who wanted to mark each time that he received Testosterone (hormone therapy), but it could be used for any moment in transitioning such as name or pronoun changes, coming out to loved ones or moments of medical transition. Jewish sacred texts such as the Mishna, the Talmud, midrash and classical legal codes acknowledge the diversity of gender identities in our communities, despite the way that mainstream Jewish religious tradition has effaced the experiences of transgender, intersex and gender queer Jews. This blessing signals the holiness present in the moments of transitioning that transform Jewish lives and affirms the place of these moments within Jewish sacred tradition.

In Heideggerian time, the future precedes the past and the present in constituting being, and this future is mortality. Liturgical time is the performance of a different future, a hope for resurrection, through the repetition of the past. Trans/cription is both the in-breaking of trans/crip lives in liturgical experience and the in-breaking of liturgical time in the mundane repetition of fleshly practices. Together, the practices of trans/cription demand systemic change and individual transformation that together might, in Sharon Betcher's words (2007: 153), "call forth . . . the corporate incarnation of the Crip Nation."

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**Max Thornton** is a PhD candidate in theological and philosophical studies in religion at Drew University. He is a recipient of University of California, Riverside's 2018–19 Holstein Dissertation Fellowship.

### Note

1. Baril's (2016) clever "trans-crip-t" formulation encompasses an additional layer of Anglonormativity and linguistic translation, which is outside the scope of this essay.

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