

Crippling Masculinity: Designing Crip Utopias

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Submitted: July 15, 2025 – Published: December 22, 2025

The Fashioned body is never an abject one. The Fashioned body is one that is incessantly bound, plucked, shaped to fit the borders of desirability as demarcated by white supremacy. To be capital F-fashionable, then, is to be normate, as the abject bodies rot beneath. *Crippling Masculinity: Designing Fashion Utopias* asks what it means to reconfigure fashion as a relational practice, to refuse Fashion as law, and to instead understand it as a malleable force that animates and embodies our relationships with one another and the world. *Crippling Masculinity: Designing Fashion Utopias*, which was exhibited at Tangled Art + Disability from March 10 to May 12, 2023, was the result of a research project that explored how Deaf, Disabled, Mad-identified men and masculine presenting non-binary people forge identities through dress in their everyday lives through interviews and workshops.¹ The research team consisted of academics from Parsons School of Design, University of Alberta, and Toronto Metropolitan University, spearheaded by principal investigator Ben Barry and co-investigator Megan Strickfaden.²

The strength of this project and the subsequent exhibition lie in its interdependence, namely in playing with fashion as a relational practice rather than a cemented hierarchical one. In centering their experiences and choices within the project, it positioned disabled people as epistemological experts of their own bodies, presentations, and identities, something rarely prioritized in large exhibitions about disability; an example of this is *Fashion Follows Form: Designs for Sitting*, which was exhibited at the ROM from 2014 to 2015.³ *Fashion Follows Form* featured Izzy Camilleri's adaptive designs on thin, white, seated mannequins. The focus of the exhibition was on Camilleri's voice and designs, rather than the people she was designing for. In contrast, participants a part of *Crippling Masculinity* selected vibrant colors for their 3D printed mannequins, which stands in contrast with the sterile tones disabled people

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1. "Crippling Masculinity: Designing Fashion Utopias," Tangled Art + Disability, accessed August 24, 2025, <https://tangledarts.org/whats-on/cripping-masculinity-designing-fashion-utopias/>.
2. "Meet the Team," Crippling Masculinity, accessed August 11, 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240811001202/http://crippingmasculinity.com/>.
3. "Fashion Follows Form," Royal Ontario Museum, accessed August 24, 2025, <https://www.rom.on.ca/whats-on/exhibitions/fashion-follows-form-designs-sitting>.

tend to be associated with, infusing the space with a sense of joy often denied from disabled people. The personalization of each mannequin that denotes disabled people as individuals with specific bodies is significant as the mannequin itself is an abstracted body for mass-production and commercial display utilized as a tool to define the “normative” body — one that is thin, white, and able. Additionally, participants decided whether or not their forms could be touched and if their forms could be seen in states of undress whilst the clothes were worn for the runway show. Visitors experienced the exhibit through tactile, embodied means; they were able to touch pieces of clothing that had been “hacked” and envision it on the disabled body-mind that it was intended for through 3D printed mannequins of the disabled participants. The exhibit introduced visitors to the concept of “fashion hacking”, a process in which disabled people or “hackers” worked with student-designers to alter their garments to better fit their body-mind needs. Through engaging with one another during the course of several workshops, a relationship between the student-designers and hackers emerged — with clothing as the catalyst.⁴ What is most fascinating here is an iteration of futurity framed outside of curative temporalities, curative referring to the time frame that casts disabled people as obstacles to progress, where the only appropriate disabled body is one that is working towards its inevitable cure.⁵ This “hacking” refuses a disability situated to a constant need for progress and overcome by making clothes for their disabled body-minds as they are now, as they may exist for as long as they live. It irreversibly marks these garments as created for specific disabled body-minds that anticipates a life to be lived in and with these pieces. This is significant in a world that invests in disabled death rather than disabled life. *Crippling Masculinity* builds a fashion microcosm that relies on interdependence and disabled ingenuity, one that rejects the intentional invisibility produced by the dominant fashion industry.

That said, the framework employed in this exhibition feels as if it limits the scope of disability to its potential desirability within dominant culture. The universality of disability as an integral part of the human experience does not negate disability as a tool that has been sharpened by white supremacy, colonialism, and empire to maim and kill. In this I also acknowledge that disability is not only a mere consequence of empire, but concurrently evidence of survival, resistance, alternate ways of being embroiled in specific social fabrics. The usage of the word “crip” denotes a particular kind of politic, one that is oriented towards decolonialism and the global majority. The crip call is not to become normate, it is to agitate.⁶ Crip purposefully turns away from disability studies and capital-D Disability as co-opted, capitalized on, and legitimized by the State, thus it necessitates a centering of the global majority further than treating transnational analysis as solely a matter of careless consumption and citation. It is central to Crip orientations to interrogate the ways that knowledge about disability is produced by examining how incidents of disability and debility are inextricably and differently bound to race/gender/class/nation transnationally.⁷ As Helen Meekosha reminds, the “anti-colonialist politics of disabled people in the majority world have yet to be documented.”⁸ Returning to *Crippling Masculinity*’s emphasis on fashion as an interdependent practice, the absence of the original makers of the garments — likely garment workers based in the Global South (or incarcerated communities within the internal colonies), as key figures to the existence of this project, further reifies Fashion and the disposability of garment workers from the global majority. Furthermore, even if clothes created as a result of this exhibition were not “hacked” but custom made, the raw materials, dyes and production of the fabric are inseparable from the global majority. Fashion is an engine of extinction that regards the Other as bodies from which to extract labour and surplus value, thus deeming their souls, homelands, cultures, and makers as expendable.⁹ It inten-

4. Ben Barry, Philippa Nesbitt, Alexis De Villa, Kristina McMullin and Jonathan Dumitra, “Re-Making Clothing, Re-Making Worlds: On Crip Fashion Hacking,” *Social Sciences*, Vol. 12, no. 9 (2023): 10, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12090500>.

5. Alison Kafer, “Time for Disability Studies and a Future for Crips,” in *Feminist Queer Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 28.

6. Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip*, 33.

7. Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip*, 33.

8. Helen Meekosha, “Decolonizing disability: thinking and acting globally,” *Disability and Society*, Vol. 26, no. 6 (2011): 677, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2011.602860>.

9. Sandra Niessen, “Fashion, Its Sacrifice Zone, and Sustainability,” *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 24, no. 6 (2020): 859–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2020.1800984>.

tionally disables and discards in service of empire. Although it would have been incredibly difficult to track down the maker of each of the garments altered, the original garment makers should be factored into the conversations surrounding fashion and disability. How could these projects evolve with the acknowledgement, consideration, and commitment to recognizing Fashion as a disabling industry that disproportionately and significantly impacts those of the global majority? Moving forward, I believe these projects could benefit from directly addressing these intersections. Fashioning Crip utopias demands a care-full upheaval of systems that mark swathes of land and their inhabitants as already dead, as predisposed to death and debility, systems that sacrifice our kith and kin for the expansion of the Fashion system.

It is necessary to go further than imagining disability as a nation with a shared culture — a philosophy that hinges on settler colonialism and conquest.¹⁰ Disabled people do not need to be included in a Fashion industry that maims in search of capital. Redefining capital F-ashion and fashion through a disabled lens must be foregrounded in a transnational analysis of race/class/gender/disability/nationhood that seeks to generate a sartorial understanding of disability “located within the historical and cultural detritus of the colonial.”¹¹ *Crippling Masculinity*, in the absence of a global perspective, feels as if it seeks to instate an alternative normal, while leaving the very machinations that construct normalcy unnamed, unmarked, and thus uninterrupted. It describes a “Crip Utopia” as a kind of imagined ideal, where one could argue that the needs of some come at the expense of others. A “Crip Utopia” founded on the disposal of deliberately debilitated bodies of the global majority further cements the perception of the global north as holding the key to the liberalization of disability, whereas the Global South must dutifully bear the brunt of its weaponization.¹² A focus on growing disability culture alone is not enough when its expansion is inseparable and dependent on imperial projects. We must interrogate who is able to participate in a disability culture that prioritizes empowerment and inclusion discourses and why. While *Crippling Masculinity* attempts to envision a beautiful future of alterity, and it begins to in many ways, it would benefit from pushing the boundaries of the exhibition to question how we can go beyond frameworks of inclusion. The object body is never Fashionable, and it does not need to be when Fashion rests on a concerted fashioning of continuous violence.

Art-making is world-making. In creating art communally, we have the potential to make new worlds that rest on foundations of care in lieu of violence. *Crippling Masculinity* begins to do this by resituating fashion as collective creation, and honouring the ways that disabled bodyminds show up in the world. It challenges exhibitions that tokenise and relegate disabled people to objects for display rather than beings with life experiences and knowledge to share. Future iterations of this project would benefit from buttressing its interdependence with a vigilant anticolonial practice that examines and implicates Fashion in itself to further the communal message echoed within the exhibition. Through extending the interdependence exercised in this exhibition to garment workers that endure the violence of Fashion, perhaps a different fashion reality can be created. What would it look like if we rejected the systems that turned garment workers’ blood into fuel for our consumption? A Crip fashion utopia can look like one where we relentlessly refuse to give each other up to the death-making machines that threaten to swallow us all. Fashioning Crip utopias — that stay true to their titular crippled ethos — must be an experiment in building our worlds anew in service of each other, to break the boundaries of what we believe to be possible for the clothes we wear and their makers, to re-story fashion based in collective liberation.

10. Mel Y. Chen, Alison Kafer, Eunjung Kim and Julie Avril Minich, *Crip Genealogies* (Duke University Press, 2023), 39.

11. Chen et al., *Crip Genealogies*, 41.

12. Jasbir K. Puar, “Crip Nationalism,” in *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 66.

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