

Creating Collective Access: Crip made brilliance in Detroit and beyond.

- Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha

Creating Collective Access was a cri¹p made piece of brilliance that came together in the summer of 2010. I think one quality of disabled enius is innovation and improvisation on little cash resources. It's why we get pissed when abled people get all "access is too expensive, wah, we can't do it, you're being mean!" when sick and disabled folks ask about access info for an event and are understandably pissed when it's not there. I mean, most of us are broke, because ableism makes it so that we're cash-poor, and I've seen disabled folks build ramps out of plywood or rent one from the drugstore for \$35. We have to be marvelously creative to survive an ableist world that was made to kill us, so why can't your able bodied ass try and figure something out? Oh yeah, you forgot disability exists again. Gotcha.

Anyways. You can read much more about it at <https://creatingcollectiveaccess.wordpress.com/>, but in my personal version of the story, CCA happened because it was 2010, and three disabled queer APIA women and gender non conforming femmes were on a conference call to plan the workshops and gatherings we were organizing at the Allied Media Conference and the US Social Forum, and we were completely fucking stressed out about how we were going to survive said conferences. This is a very common disability experience- that of getting ready to go travel to a conference and having your freakout about how the whole thing will fuck your body. Will the airport break your wheelchair? Will you get really sick from a fragrance exposure? Will the promised accessible van or ASL just not be there? Where will the food be, and is it stuff you can eat? Will you be 1000% overstimulated by thousands of people doing and talking about intense things? What if you have a panic attack or suicidal ideation 2000 mile away from home? How will you negotiate the world away from the crip survival skills you have where you live? All of this is often a private freakout, because of the ways access is seen as as personal responsibility that crips are supposed to handle on our own and not bother other folks with, and a pain in the ass or a charity we should be grateful for, to everyone else. Crips are used to feeling that our disability experiences (ie our bodyminds) are private, embarrassing, weird and not to be spoken about- especially crips who I have met who may be more or less out about being disabled and working mostly in non-disabled social justice communities.

The difference was: this time, we were coming together at a nascent moment of disability justice organizing. In 2010, disabled queer and trans people of color were coming together, talking about our intersectional lives, and talking about what disability organizing would mean that didn't leave any part of ourselves behind. We were rooted in a ground of other disabled QTPOC finding each other- through online portals like Sick and Disabled Queers (a disability justice Facebook group created by genderqueer disabled Arab writer Billie Rain), the Azolla Story (an online portal for disabled queer and trans people of color), through the cultural political work of Sins Invalid and the Disability Justice Collective and through our own blogs. (Crips loves the internet; it makes connecting possible. I can organize flat on my ass on the heating pad.) And on that call, we had a moment of clarity of: we don't have to do this on our own or make our access needs a shameful, private secret. We can experiment in coming together and caring for each other.

In the website we threw together three weeks before the AMC, we said:

1 Crip or krip is disabled slang for a sick or disabled person. Similar to queer, it is insider language where we reclaim a slur (in this case cripple) that has been used against us.

“We know that for many of us, access is on our minds when it comes to traveling, navigating the city, movement spaces, buildings, sidewalks, public transportation, rides, the air, the bathrooms, the places to stay, the pace, the language, the cost, the crowds, the doors, the people who will be there and so so so much more.

Would you like to be connected to a network of crips and our allies/comrades who are working together to create collective access?

What is collective access? Collective Access is access that we intentionally create collectively, instead of individually.

Most of the time, access is placed on the individual who needs it. It is up to you to figure out your own access, or sometimes, up to you and your care giver, personal attendant (PA) or random friend. Access is rarely weaved into a collective commitment and way of being; it is isolated and relegated to an after thought (much like disabled people).

Access is complex. It is more than just having a ramp or getting disabled folks/crips into the meeting. Access is a constant process that doesn't stop. It is hard and even when you have help, it can be impossible to figure out alone.

We are working to create mutual aid between crips and beyond! Things we are thinking about as possibilities for collective access in Detroit:

- collective eating and food gathering. having a central accessible place where we eat together. This space could also be kid friendly to help provide mutual aid for parents and their children. We may go on joint food runs to the grocery store or to pick up food and bring it back.
- collectivizing rides—pooling transportation for those who need it. helping to coordinate rides to and from places.
- sharing information/communication. helping us be in touch to share information (about access, ableism that is happening, workshops, resources, etc.), connect and provide a working network of crips through out the AMC and the USSF.

The Network: We imagine that there will be pockets of planned access happening. We cannot anticipate or meet everyone's medical or access needs and we are sure that for a lot of you, you have your PAs, folks who you feel comfortable with and trust already lined up. Our hope is to create a network that can connect these access pockets together. We hope we can help each other and share resources: you can't walk long distance, but i can speed in my chair down to the end of the block and get food; i can't read, but you can, so you help me find my workshop in the schedule; you can help make calls to organize the food gathering and eating, while i carry the food up into the room. We hope that together we can create a culture of collective access.

We are just trying this out! would you like to join us in practicing what this could look like? do you have ideas? are you an ally/comrade who wants to help out or be on call?"²

2 From the blog post “Crips visiting Detroit” posted on June 2, 2010, at [“https://creatingcollectiveaccess.wordpress.com/2010/06/02/crips-visiting-detroit/”](https://creatingcollectiveaccess.wordpress.com/2010/06/02/crips-visiting-detroit/)

And it worked. People found us, through email and Facebook and on site. In my experience, it all came together really quickly and easily. There was so much creativity, hustle and fun. One member drove up from North Carolina to Detroit with two other disabled POC and her personal care attendant in her wheelchair accessible van. The van legally fits 4 people, but I have photos of 13 crips crammed into it driving through Detroit, laughing our asses off. We shared info about fragrance free body care products and shared actual fragrance free hair products for Black and brown hair and skin, including with two disabled teenage women of color who had never heard of fragrance-free before but were down to learn.

We pooled our skills and needs and found they weren't a liability, they supported each other. One person charmed the dorm staff into getting them to unlock the fourth floor kitchen so we could cook and store groceries. One neurodivergent person who didn't have mobility limitations walked a mile to the closest restaurant to load up someone's spare manual wheelchair with our shwarma orders and walked it back to everyone who couldn't walk that far.

Being less isolated helped us make group demands of the AMC- who mailed ordered in fragrance free soap for the washrooms because there wasn't any local store in Detroit that stocked it and reached out to every workshop presenter to give them a crash course in accessibility- and helped us survive the USSF, which had some major access challenges (ie, no wheelchair accessible shuttle even though it was on all the promo material, very long walks through a huge conference center.) I remember someone texting "I am spooning out, I need crip love" and all of us getting there as fast we could, and them saying that just watching us limping and rolling towards them through the convention center made all the difference. We survived, and we also made powerful community. Committed to leaving no one behind, we rolled in a big, slow group of wheelchair users, cane users and slow-moving people through the conference. People got out of the way. We stayed in, exploring "JOMO" (the opposite of FOMO, JOMO is "the joy of missing out" and ate and shared about our disabled lives. For some of us, it was our first time doing that. People cried, flirted and fell in love.

In my experience, CCA folks went back to their home communities- located all over North America- transformed from the experience. Some of us already were involved in disabled communities or activism; for some of us, CCA was our first experience with crip community. For many on both sides, being in a space that was created by and centered disabled queer femmes of color was a revelation. So was the experience that we could support each other, instead of the expectation being that we either had to take care of our stuff on our own and not inconvenience anyone else with it, or hope that paid, official care workers would do it. Folks went back home and started crip hangouts, care collectives, and zine and art projects. They came back less willing to accept ableism from conferences and movement spaces, because they knew it could be different- and if it could happen in Detroit, which didn't even have a grocery store back then, it could happen anywhere.

And it wasn't a perfect straight shot happily ever after story. There have been a lot of challenges and learning moments along the way. CCA contained in an organized form at the AMC for two more years; by 2012, we had gotten so popular that we were kind of a victim of our own success. We couldn't all eat together because there were 50 of us, and organizers felt that they couldn't keep doing so much vital access work without some cash and more organizational backing to support it. The attempt at making a Bay Area CCA struggled for many reasons, including realizing that people with chronic pain and fatigue can have a hard time providing for the care needs of physically disabled folks trying to transfer to the toilet, and that just because we can't always physically provide for each other's needs or know intrinsically what they are doesn't mean we can't support or be in solidarity with each other.

How do I think CCA epitomizes emergence? Innovation, experimentation, relationships. That you couldn't have planned this shit, but it happened because of lots of disability justice work getting the ground ready for this bloom. You couldn't have done any of this from a top down, flow chart, strategic

planning meeting in a board room. It happened because three disabled queer people of color trusted our own brilliant knowledge of what we and our communities needed, our own resources we already had to do it, and reached out, with love, to each other.

For more information about Creating Collective Access, check out three years of archived posts at <https://creatingcollectiveaccess.wordpress.com>.

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