

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Crip Club Vibes: Technologies for New Nightlife

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I've been thinking about what it would mean to design nightlife around disability. We need all nightlife spaces to become accessible, of course, something that calls for a thoroughgoing restructuring of the built environment, transportation systems, and access labor. But I'm imagining the possibilities for creating a world within the inaccessible status quo, a nightlife community that could divine the truth and complexity of disability history, culture, and resistance.

When I ask my disability community in New York City about nightlife, I get a series of sighs. Nightlife is exhausting. That's not because being disabled in nightlife spaces is in itself exhausting. It's exhausting because ableism is exhausting and because nightlife is a nexus of many inaccessible cultural forms that make parties, clubs, and bars feel like one marathon after another.

We don't often think of nightlife as a technology itself, but we should. It's hard to decide the status of nightlife in basic terms: Is it a community? An industry? A social function? If we take up the call in the manifesto that inspires this special issue, we can locate nightlife within the "non-compliant knowing-making" of crip technoscience that relishes the world-making possibilities for disabled living (Fritsch & Hamraie, 2019). Technoscientific

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protocols for thinking about nightlife offer what has traditionally been absent: deliberation, design, and aesthetics as a toolkit for shaping our collective imaginations and desires.

Tinkering, often the kernel of technoscientific practice, is already what many nightlife artists understand in their work. Take, for example, the collaboration among DJs and sound engineers in the production of sonic and vibrational spheres of a party. What anthropologist Biella Coleman (2013) calls the pleasures of hacking, the skein of frustration and excitement in self-directed realization of goals and problem solving (p. 12), is an apt description of how DJs move extemporaneously through their libraries as they read and respond to the energy of a dance floor.

Crip tinkering in nightlife has the potential to rework just about everything we know about how nightlife should work. The 120 to 130 beats-per-minute tempo that is often assumed to be the standard to energize a dance floor could work in vastly different registers for wheeled movement. The aesthetics of DIY spaces could relish the invitation to modify the height of a counter or install grab bars in a bathroom.

The technoscience of crip nightlife is what scholar and poet Sami Schalk (2010) witnesses in her poem “Our Dance Dance Revolution” at the Society for Disability Studies conference dance, where bodies and limbs soar

into the air
onto the floor
against chair
 poppin' wheelies
against crutch
 spinning in circles
against shoulder
 supporting dips
against stage
 supplying lift
and

it's
all
fair
game

One story about how the punk scene grew in San Francisco involves a legendary venue called the Deaf Club. “Trashy-looking teenagers dressed

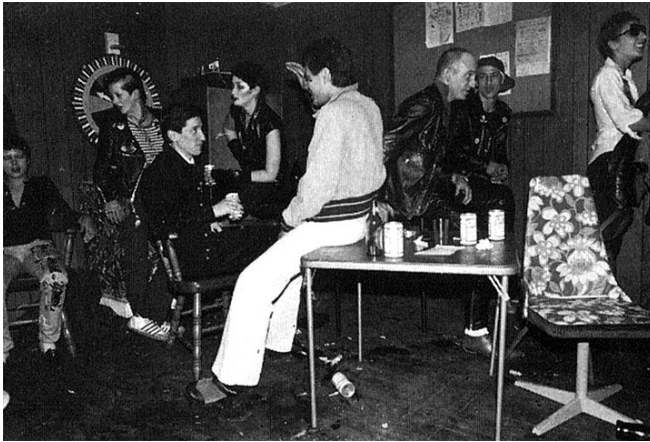


Figure 1. The Deaf Club in San Francisco, photo by Sue Brisk (likely 1979).

in thrift store chic, mingle with studiously stylish art types,” wrote *San Francisco Chronicle* music reporter Joel Selvin in October 1979 (p. 6). The “highspots” of the scene included a “former Filipino supper club,” “an ex-synagogue,” and “the San Francisco Club of the Deaf on Valencia Street, where

spike-haired fans mix with the club members, who can’t hear the music but feel the vibrations.”

The manager for a band called the Offs, the story goes, was on his way to get a burrito when he saw a “hall for rent” sign and wandered in. He negotiated on a piece of paper with Deaf man named Bill, “a mustachioed, lascivious, cigar-chewing character” (as cited in Boulware & Tudor, 2009, p. 96). Soon, the club was drawing sizable crowds with no advertising, mixing young punk fans with older members of the Deaf community who had used the space as a cultural center since the 1930s (Schneider, 2014, para. 1). “Ear-shattering, heavy-artillery live performances” (Selvin, 1996, p. 109) featured bands like the Dead Kennedys, D.O.A., The Subhumans, Tuxedomoon, X, Flipper, and The Germs.

Artist Alison O'Daniel (2013-ongoing) recreates the Deaf Club in one scene of her film *The Tuba Thieves*. As a band on stage starts a song for a rowdy young audience, a number of women several decades older play a game of cards and drink Budweisers. People sign and raise their glasses to each other. The emcee tells the crowd the neighbors are through with the noise and the weirdos. An older couple nearby gets into an argument in ASL about whether their granddaughter should move to New York.



Figure 2. The Deaf Club in New York, photo by Eli Schmidt for *The New York Times* (2016).

When O'Daniel curated an evening of music and storytelling as an extension of her film in New York in 2016, she tried to recapture the bizarre and beautiful meeting of these two powerful communities. “Punk is perfect,” said Opal Gordon, one of the

evening’s performers about the intersection of Deaf and punk cultures “because it’s loud, it’s heavy, it’s in-your-face” (as cited in Reese, 2016, para. 4). Beyond debunking the idea that Deaf people can’t enjoy music, the evening also buoyed a dream of a more inclusive and innovative nightlife scene that the Deaf Club modeled decades earlier.

When we talk about disability and nightlife, we often talk only about the physical accessibility of venues, like whether an entrance has a ramp or the bathroom has proper stall width. This kind of access is essential, and in fact the Deaf Club, located up a flight of stairs and routinely cited for unsafe conditions, was inaccessible in some of these key ways. In the wake of the deadly 2016 fire at an artist collective warehouse called Ghost Ship, city officials and activists alike have homed in on the regulatory apparatus that ensures accessibility and safety.

But missing in these conversations is an enlarged notion of *meaningful* access, one predicated on radical relationality, care, and exploration. This must include thinking of disability as a cultural and aesthetic force, where we cultivate the possibilities of bodies and minds by thinking anew about how to share and create space.

At the club, we create worlds. We have an array of technologies for it: our clothing, our intoxications, our sounds, our artwork. Club technologies plug us into creative outlets that transcend disciplinarity and individuality.

DJ artists can find disability aesthetics all around, like in an enthrallingly glitchy remix of Lady Gaga's (2016) "Joanne," the title track from an album dedicated to her exploration of the death of her artist-survivor-aunt who lived with lupus. And the DJ can work—and pay for—the music of artists who identify as disabled, like collander (2017) whose song "sickbed" attests to the crip innovations in what others might call "bedroom pop."

But the DJ must also refuse the audism of nightlife spaces. They must resist any simple ideas about how to make music accessible (like the notion that simply transcribing and projecting lyrics is what Deaf clubgoers need or want). Perhaps, instead, the DJ collaborates with a poet who scribes the score live and a choreographer who transmutes the vibrations into a sighted and perhaps haptic experience. Accessible nightlife artistry is, in this way, properly anti-disciplinary. There can't be a single ideal modality.

Those who have had the fortune to attend the Saturday night dance at conferences of the Society for Disability Studies know the unique possibilities for crip world-making in the club (or the hotel ballroom that is the club). So much speculation about the wonders of technology to erase or eliminate disability calls for a response that refuses the eugenic drive and models the brilliant alternative: spaces where disabled drag queens send up stereotypes of desexualization, Deaf DJs send vibrations through the whole body, bartenders prize care over cash, where inclusion is not merely pragmatic but transcendent.

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Bio

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