Crip Kinship: A Political Strategy of People Who Were Deemed Contagious by the Shirtless Putin

Alexander Kondakov

This article analyzes conditions in which contagious populations have found themselves in Russia and reviews theories of queer/crip kinship from two perspectives: the theories developed in academic literature, and the conceptualization of queer/crip kinship that may be derived from everyday accounts of people. The latter position is shaped through an analysis of life history interviews with disabled people who identify on the LGBTIQ spectrum in Russia. The Russian context is different from many other geographical locations, but also relates to the more common condition of precarity shared under contemporary neoliberal capitalism. Crip kinship is understood as a prominent political strategy that brings new perspectives on our futurities outside of assemblages of oppression and exploitation that able-bodiedness, heterosexism, and misogyny provoke, sustain, and enforce.

Keywords: crip / kinship / queer / Russia

In 2013, the Russian state passed an Administrative Code statute declaring “non-traditional sexual relations” such as “male homosexual relations, bisexuality, and transgenderism” as contagious and prohibited any form of “dissemination” or “propaganda” about such “non-traditional relations.” The law implies that sexual relations of this sort can be transmitted from one body to another and are dangerous for children because they can plant “non-traditional sexual attitudes” in their psyche, “provoke interest into such relationship,” and make children queer, enlarging the “diseased” population of the Russian Federation (Federal Law 2013). Within this contagious framing, the law seeks to prevent Russian children from becoming queer, and, in doing so, positions queer life as disposable (Evans and Giroux 2015).
Recent episodes of NBC’s *Saturday Night Live* (2017) depict Russian President Vladimir Putin as shirtless (played by Beck Bennett), congratulating US citizens on electing Donald Trump. The image of a shirtless Putin suggests that “compulsory able-bodiedness” (McRuer 2006, 2) is an integral part of the exclusionary ideology promoted by the current Russian government and—as suggested in the show—transmitted to the United States as a kind of infection. The president’s body is imagined as a normative reminder of how a *real man* is supposed to look, enabling an assemblage of oppressive ideologies (Puar 2007) such as heterosexism, ableism, and misogyny. In referencing Putin’s exposure of his body to the public in myriad scenes of fishing, riding a horse, and swimming—all assumed to confirm his masculinity and potency—the media reinforces his authority and renews traditional power relations by reproducing those images in various contexts, including in humor (Sperling 2015; Novitskaya 2017). Though *Saturday Night Live* establishes that Putin is openly broadcasting oppressive ideologies through the exposure of his own body, the point is to look at not the form, but the content of these utterances. All societies are informed by heterosexism, ableism, and misogyny. Thus, I offer to regard the Shirtless Putin as a metaphor marking conditions of oppression beyond national borders of Russia.

This is especially so in the context of globalized and totalizing effects of neoliberalism. After the fall of the USSR, neoliberal policies have been implemented rigorously, limiting people’s access to welfare while also privatizing care. Neoliberalism in the Russian context has been promoted in reference to privatized and traditionized filiations: family values, idyllic national sentiments, and through the scapegoating of presumably contagious populations. Families are regarded as receptacles of care without state budgeting and, hence, require nothing but rhetorical support. The hoarded funds are, in turn, used for warfare, masculinist geopolitical games, or simply personal enrichment (Stephenson 2015).

In his work on the relationship between the state, capitalism, sexuality, and disability, Robert McRuer describes the way in which disability serves as a site for state administration to establish systems of welfare redistribution while at the same time reinforcing hierarchies that sustain current inequalities in a neoliberal context (2011, 110–11). Ultimately, disability enjoys a marginal status in this system, despite its glorification in policies (108). Because of this relationship, McRuer concludes that disability justice requires “other sensations” and “other connections” (114), such as networking and imagining other futures. In this sense, relations of interdependence are crucial sites of collective experience beyond individualism. In this article, then, my aim is to amplify these networks and relations of interdependence at both the everyday and theoretical registers via the practice of queer/crip kinship. It is within the condition of the Shirtless Putin—a comical image that I use as a metaphor that stands in for the assemblage of oppressive ideologies—that the Russian people conduct our complex
and complicated lives, assemblages of a different sort. As we are being legally or politically selected as not worthy of support, and as contagious, we create our own networks of care to sustain our communities despite constraints. In this regard, I offer a queer/crip kinship that is grounded in the life experiences of people living at the intersection of queerness and disability as a way to contest the assemblage of oppressions.

Certainly, concepts such as queer, crip, or even neoliberalism are widespread and understood in Russia, although they do not originate from local epistemological and intellectual backgrounds. In analyzing the results of empirical interviews I conducted in 2016 on the experience of disabled queers in Russia, I show how it is that the Russian context enables new interpretations of queer and crip as queer/crip kinship. I use the stories collected from the interviews to track networks of queer/crip kinship that I present as crucial to the process of escaping neoliberal assemblages of oppression. The ways in which disabled and queer people are deemed contagious populations conditions the ways they reimagine their networks of kinship beyond their biological affiliation or blood relations. I juxtapose institutionalized forms of support and care to the everyday notions of kinship in order to provide a blueprint for generating better futures than those delivered by the existing assemblage of oppression and neoliberalism.

At the same time, I also question the potential of queer/crip kinship to undermine inequalities. In doing so, my article expands feminist, queer, and crip literature on kinship and offers a critical examination of rigid structures of institutionalized and/or traditionalist care.

From Identity to Assemblages

Contemporary Russia is in many ways a successor to its previous state, the Soviet Union, especially in respect to its stance on homosexuality and disability. In the USSR, male homosexuality was a criminal offence, whereas female homosexuality was a disease (Essig 1999, 45). Even though homosexuality was decriminalized in 1993 and demedicalized in 1999 (Healey 2001, 259–60), it remained enmeshed in discourses of contagion as legislators continued to propose attempts to criminalize it, law courts pursued discriminatory decisions, and politicians kept blaming homosexuals for a variety of "social diseases" (Kondakov 2013, 424). Yet, vivid and diverse queer life continues to flourish, especially in big cities, where political activism and advocacy, and queer culture and community are a part of everyday life (Essig 1999; Sozayev 2010; Stella 2015; Amico 2014). However, in 2013 with the introduction of the law banning the circulation of "propaganda" relating to "non-traditional sexual relations," queer communities around the country have reacted in various ways, from active resistance to retreat back into the closet (Soboleva and Bakhmet’ev 2014).

Disabled people have benefited from formal positive recognition in the USSR and post-Soviet Russia in law and culture, especially World War II
veterans (Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov 2014). Yet, on the everyday level, the state has also marked them as a contagious population, quarantining disabled people outside of public view in institutions or other private environments. As in the case of homosexuality, disabled people have been marked by contagion through legal apparatuses. Since the USSR, welfare ministries and agencies have developed complicated grids of categories of disability, whereby benefits and rights distribution depends upon the particular category one occupies, and this categorization is a mechanism of control. This system is divided into three groups of disabled people. “Group I” is categorized as having the most severe forms of impairment, while “Group III” has the mildest. Groups are also subdivided by age, cause of disability (work, military conflict, birth, etc.), with each sub-category providing different sets of benefits and rights (Phillips 2010, 50–52). The category one occupies within this system determines possible labor occupations (Kurlenkova 2017), availability and amount of pension, and benefits in the form of free resort tours, free public transport passes, and so on (Madison 1989, 176–77, 211). This system allows for an easy administration of disability so far as the state can always determine who falls under which legal category and exactly what set of benefits, labor rights, or monetary remuneration this entails. At the same time, this logic of categorization has been used to restrict the access of disabled people to public spaces such as workplaces. A good illustration of the government’s attempts to contain and isolate disabled populations is provided by Cassandra Hartblay, who neatly documents the authority’s efforts to construct “accessible cities” (2015, 2017). While formally equipping cities with ramps, the authorities fail to make urban infrastructure accessible to anyone who would want to use it. So long as these facilities are designed for disposable people, they are useless because they lack the details to make them accessible, or they lead to a wall instead of a door, or they are equipped with a call button that does not function. A general notion of disposability informs the logic of legislators and officials when they design or implement corresponding programs: they simply do not care if programs work.

The complex categorization of disabled people has proved to be an important part of the neoliberalization of Russia, frequently at the expense of disabled people who use this system (Rasell 2009). For example, since 2005, nonmonetary benefits have been gradually monetarized, offering an unfair contribution to those entitled when they exchange natural benefits for financial ones. Further, the criteria of eligibility have been under constant revision, making annual confirmation of disability in medical institutions obligatory. Finally, the growth of pensions has failed to match Russia’s inflation. All of this has reinforced poverty and precarity among disabled people in Russia (Tyndik and Vasin 2016). In fact, the recent economic crisis in Russia has greatly contributed to the impoverishment of families who care for disabled people as these families have moved below the “poverty line” because prices for medication skyrocketed and the amount of disability pensions remained
very low (Slobodenyuk 2017, 194). This suggests at least two things in terms of governance of disability. First, the state emphatically regards disability as an individual and private problem for families to manage while offering little financial support. Second, disabled populations are regarded as unworthy of care—a line in the state budget that can always be reduced when crisis comes. Taken together, these tendencies uncover the neoliberal logic behind Russia’s disability policies. Even if the state does not officially condemn disability as contagious as they have done with homosexuality, the state still maintains a robust system of welfare redistribution that disadvantages disabled people, leading to their social and political isolation.

Despite the different rhetorical treatment of either homosexuals or the disabled, the Russian government generally isolates these populations through dis-courses of contagion. In the USSR, the isolation was achieved directly through placing homosexual men in prisons and disabled people and lesbians in medical institutions and family homes. In this respect, contagion was understood as a likelihood of spreading homosexuality and disability among those people who were not considered homosexual and disabled if no actions were taken to separate those already infected from the rest of the public. Hence, safeguarding the heterosexual and able-bodied public was the government’s main concern. This still holds true today. What has changed is that physical isolation is replaced by governing appearance (Butler 2015, 24). People are banned from appearing queer or disabled in the public, not from being queer or disabled in private (whatever the way being is defined). Isolation takes place through more individualized practices as people are encouraged to govern themselves from publically appearing homosexual or disabled. This means that the main mechanism enabled by the logic of contagion is breaking connections between people and restricting relations to privately available ones (if any at all). The answer to such individualized practices is to enhance interdependence and relationality, magnifying the ties that bring people in contact with each other rather than taking them apart. This, I propose, is the importance of queer/crip kinship.

Three Approaches to Queer/Crip Kinship

Capitalism and the neoliberal state are usually regarded as no-alternative entities we simply have to live with. Yet, queer theory shows that we are always already living in alternative worlds, though sometimes we do not recognize their worth (Judith Halberstam 2005). The spaces that are regarded as marginal and unimportant in fact indicate the fragility of totalizing systems such as capitalism (Floyd 2009). Returning to Shirtless Putin, I could also queerly interpret this invocation as a manifestation of weakness: so long as Shirtless Putin is meant to reinforce ableism, masculinity, and heterosexuality (both as a form of joke in Saturday Night Live and as a form of the president’s strategy of self-promotion), he also indicates the instability of these phenomena, as they
require constant support and reaffirmation. The forms this support takes are systematic violence and discrimination in the Russian law, in addition to the ridiculous pictures of Russia's president in the media. However, from this we also learn that resisting concrete acts of violence and discrimination means fighting more general systems of oppression. What could be drawn from queer theory are more concrete forms of resistance, in addition to the acknowledgement of poor social conditions. Within some approaches, queer kinship might be understood as a special form of resistance, an everyday routine of networking that produces new affiliations, futures, and political outcomes (Eng 2003).

Queer kinship has been theorized for decades, and there are many different ways of defining it. Kath Weston's (1997) view posits queer kinship as a relationship that echoes the heterosexual family, but also necessarily expands its narrow definition from blood or legal descent to deliberate choice of establishing a kind of family relationship. In her analysis, this kinship is an institution—a set of social rules—that tolerates modernist notions of individualism (Weston 1997; see Freeman 2007, 304). This version of kinship also reinforces neoliberal notions of individual responsibility. In feminist theory, a critique of queer kinship was careful and pronounced for its reproduction of oppressive family formations (Donovan 2015; Young and Boyd 2006; Auchmuty 2004) and misrepresentation of actual queer affiliations (Walters 2012).

Another vision of queer kinship is theorized through performative practices offered by Judith Butler (2000, 2002). Instead of seeing kinship as relations of blood or officially recognized legal ties to one another, Butler suggests that by performing a variety of actions people travel across different kinship positions that operate in relation to “multiply layered family situations” (2000, 22). In this sense, queer kinship subverts traditional institutions of family, as it allows for political transformation that opens up utterly unknown and more desirable futures. Its political effect is entailed by deconstruction of stable foundations of classical kinship theory and practice.

Advancing this argument and taking into account Bourdieu's theorizing on habitus, Elizabeth Freeman elaborates a theory of performative queer kinship that allows for the reproduction of queerness through cultural representations (2007, 309). Her contribution hints at kinship’s queer function of reproduction and in this regard significantly departs from Butler, who theorizes the ways we do things that undermines foundational elements (gender division or incest taboo, for example) of that very practice and consequently changes current institutions, even if those institutions are as dear to us as drag performance. Yet, the emphasis on practices within kinship networks is worth exploring because it constitutes the third approach to queer kinship.

This third major approach to queer kinship prioritizes affective and pragmatic links that constitute networks of mutual support and care when current conditions are characterized by shortage of both and/or reproduce inequalities.
(e.g., Jakobsen 2015). I would call it an environmentalist definition of kinship that expands possible paths of interdependence from humans to animals to things to atmospheres and so on (Kafer 2013). In fact, this definition of queer kinship is also attuned to crip theories that develop notions of disability as con-nectedness to everything in and outside of one’s body (Fritsch 2016, 355). It is a crippled version of queer kinship because it emphasizes the need for care within kinship networks sometimes underestimated in social model of disability studies or queer theorizing (Kafer 2013, 4; Johnson 2015). In other words, it expands the networks’ reach across species and things by including wheelchairs, guide dogs, urban and rural environment, and so on into a common ground that makes all these things interdependent (Ahuja 2015; Kafer 2013, 103; Michalko 1998). Finally, it challenges the lack of futurity often ascribed to disabled people through their prognosis or diagnosis (Fritsch 2016) and opens possibilities for political coalitions that bring in “accessible futures” (Kafer 2013, 169). In this latter sense, queer/crip kinship is a political strategy that contributes to deconstructionist theory and practice. However, it accentuates the production of imaginaries of better futures instead of offering critique of existing bases of inequalities—though they are related to one another.

This conception of queer/crip kinship is sympathetic to various forms of relationships outside of institutionalized interactions and to creative use in existing institutions for social projects that emphasize intimate interdependence of people as opposed to cold, formalistic, mechanic, uncreative, and stable repetitions usually associated with rigid institutional forms of sociality. Depending on the social context, these queer/crip kinship connections may engage communities, NGOs, families, sexual partners, animals, friends, hospitals, or all of these together for practical and political gains. As vivid examples, there are networks in trans* communities (Jack Halberstam 2016, 369) and AIDS NGOs in China (Miller 2016) that could be seen as controversial institutionalized forms of care in some contexts, but are understood as queer/crip kinship networks within the Chinese context. And in relation to the inequities of neoliberal capitalism, these queer/crip kinship connections become crucial to saving lives. Alternative networks become both sources of vital support and political strategies of resistance. They offer the possibility of another future and a means of doing politics by collective imagination.

In what follows, I track the specific connections of queer/crip kinship in Russia, marking queer/crip kinship not as a concrete and already defined term that refers to certain collections of meanings, but as a logic or analytical conception whose meanings are always open to new definitions. Referring to this term helps me establish and enhance a dialogue across languages and epistemologies. My purpose is not to adapt foreign terminology for the Russian context, but to appropriate it to a certain extent and then engage this terminology to enrich it within a specific geographic and temporal context.
Before my analysis, I briefly describe the data collection method. The research team issued a call to interview those who self-identify as both queer and disabled. The call was distributed through social networks and attracted responses from all over Russia. We gathered twenty-three life stories that are diverse in terms of sexuality, disability, and other conditions of experience. While the administrative system of disability in Russia depends on formal medical categories, in practice, they become important reference points for self-identification as well. People who were interviewed for this study referred to the formal categories, though they also used other forms of identification. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and over Skype and email in order to provide access to the study to anyone who wanted to participate despite possible geographic or accessibility-related limitations. This allowed for greater geographical coverage, but also for including stories of those who feel more comfortable communicating online rather than in person. The interviewees were given the space to tell their life stories with very little intervention from the interviewers.

The most neutral categories that the interviewees used to describe themselves were those of personal characteristics that stress certain traits of personal-ity that seemed to be important to accentuate for the interviewer: “lazybones,” “workaholic,” or “a weirdo,” for example. This was especially evident when interviewees wanted to highlight their autonomy in making decisions about their own lives, independent from the institutional structures that attempt to subdue them:

“I am actually a kind of person, to tell you the truth, who doesn’t pay too much attention to all these welfare benefits, eh, not really, eh. Why—because I want to make money myself irrespective of my disability that I have, eh, so that it wasn’t the state, dependence from the state, but just me as a normal person” (016). This interviewee related disability to dependence and referred to the individual self as a final resort of escape from this dependence. For her, money is not simply finances, but also the insurance of autonomy that she qualifies as a characteristic of a “normal person.” Welfare benefits, as she thinks, exclude her from the circle of “normal persons” where she intends to stay by refusing state support. Many interviewees who deliberately reject welfare benefits articulate their decision in terms of the will expressed by a powerful person. I propose to understand this rhetoric as a sign of distancing from oppressive institutions rather than a desire to be on one’s own in the face of possible troubles. It conveys a feeling of urgent necessity for resistance to the state through refusing its often-useless offers of help.

Nonetheless, medical vocabulary was extremely powerful in interviewees' self-assessment when the conversation addressed the subject of disability. Usually the interviewees referred to their official diagnosis or legal disability groups that they had been granted. The formal division in three groups seemed to be
interiorized quite profoundly: “I have the Second Disability Group by general disease” (002); “Well, I’ve been a disabled for eight years by now with the Second Group of disability” (004); “I am the First Group of Disability, my diagnosis is Myopathy-Muscular Dystrophy” (017). Such statements were produced not only in response to a question by an interviewer, but also in the process of narration about oneself without intervention. The interviewees navigated the medical diagnoses and reproduced medical discourse at ease. This might be related to their long experience of communication with medical institutions that transmitted knowledge to patients:

When I was born, eh, some unknown doctors when they were taking me out of that from where everyone is taken out, well, they harmed my seventh cervical vertebrae, in this case it is called birth trauma. As for diagnosis, I could even find it, I have Brachial Plexitis of the upper left limb. My mom cared for me all my life, eh, all those clinics, until perhaps 20 years old I was under constant medical supervision, I was always getting free medical care. (009)

This passage demonstrates the confidence with which disabled people use medical terms: instead of saying “a hand,” this interviewee uses strict anatomical definition, “the upper left limb.” His medical knowledge comes from routine interactions with medical institutions and authorities, as he has no medical education and works in the unrelated field of public relations.

Yet, there are infinitely more creative ways that the interviewees used to refer to themselves: “emesman” (a person with MS—multiple sclerosis, 019), “I told her I’m on wheels, she thought I have a car” (a person who uses wheelchair, 016), “a girl with spastic” (Child’s Spastic cerebral palsy, 015), and so on. These ironic and everyday terms contribute to the development of a vocabulary outside of medical definitions that relates to one’s experience. They coexist with but are not exhausted by medical and legal categories.

In terms of sexuality, while our interviewees could be described in rigid identity categories (see List of interviewees for details), they seemed to be uncomfortable with this framing in an array of different ways. When the interviewees approached this topic, some of them regretfully reported that this sphere of life was significantly unimportant to them because disability enabled the trope of being a sexless or asexual person (McRuer 2011, 107). For example, this informant compares his sexual experience before disability and after: “nowadays, I do not see myself as an LGBT, right. To tell you the truth, I confess, I sometimes have some ideas and fantasies and so on, and so forth, but I don’t think that somebody, some guy, would have a fantasy, eh, of sexual, well, contacts with me, so I don’t even think about it anymore” (011). Importantly, the interviewee employs a collective abbreviation term “LGBT” to refer only to himself: he refers to the whole range of sexual identities to identify with and embody them all in just one body, a rather common practice of identification in Russia. His pessimism about the prospects of sexual encounters is not shared
by many of our other interviewees. Their sexual life is rich and diverse as well as the ways they
tend to self-identify in relation to sexuality. Apart from the usual suspects such as “lesbian,” “gay,”
“bisexual,” and “trans*,” our interviewees also presented themselves as “asexual, grey
panromantic,” “passive kinky gay,” “transgender bisexual,” “non-binary neutral-gender,” and
“bigender bisexual polyamory.”

The life experiences of many people do not fit the narrow categories, and they use creative
language practices to communicate what they feel. Importantly, sexuality is something that our
interviewees spend time thinking of and rethinking. Even if in terms of statistical calculations: “I’m
quite open, I don’t think it’s a shame. If you ask me whether I’m bi or gay, then, on average I guess
I’m gay, because I had relationship with a girl probably fifteen years ago, for the last time. So I have
had this experience, but well. . . . For the last fifteen years, I sleep only with guys” (004). Thus,
sexuality is not taken for granted, but it is subject to reflection, hesitation, calculation, legitimation,
and justification. Sexuality is actively thought of, learnt as a kind of distant experience of one’s self
to see if it matches existing categories or requires creative use of language. In this sense, sexuality
is also explored through a variety of senses that able-bodied societies (languages, vocabularies)
ignore when offering identity categories. For example, this interviewee described her romance with
a voice of a singer she heard in her adolescence as a lesbian experience because she had no other
words to explain human-to-voice relationship:

I had my favorite LPs with songs by Anna German, I, eh, em, it was, sincerely speaking, it was my first feeling to
a girl. I was astonished with her voice, I thought there is nothing in this world that could be more beautiful
than that voice. And so, since my childhood I have noticed that, well, all girls like boys, but I like other girls, for
example, Anna German. (023)

The interviewees also varied in age, born from 1956 to 1997, though categories of age were also
questioned. For example, one interviewee has “always thought that other people rush much faster
along the way to adulthood” (001). Hence, any indication of age—as well as other categories I use
throughout the paper—should not provoke any presumption about what exactly the person is
supposed to say or do, what kind of person she is, or what experience she has gone through. These
categories are used to see them in a context that privileges hierarchical systems of legal and
epistemological identity boxes. Yet, the actual experiences are assemblages of complex and
complicated life situations.

The juxtaposition of two contextual domains—the official one of policies and laws, and the personal
one of identifications and reflections—offers important critical insights from the very beginning.
First, these two domains intersect but do not exactly match one another. People are targeted by
official policies and logics, yet these logics also get interpreted at the very moment of being
assumed or implemented by the people they target.
Second, some aspects of the policies of contagion enacted by the Soviet and Russian governments are directly confronted. Those who manage to exit the state system of support offered along with social stigmatization resist inequalities inherent to this system. Finally, this brief description of the context from two different perspectives shows that the situation is complex and multilayered assemblage.

Institutions and Kinships

The context of the many conversations we had during this research was an experience of interaction within various institutions, such as the state and hospitals that play an important role, as demonstrated above, in maintaining the isolation of contagious populations. Yet, interviewees tended to agree that the institutions they interact with are not as formal and rigid as is commonly assumed. Rather, they are unstable, unpredictable, and informal sets of practices that on occasion fail to pursue the targets they have been designed to pursue. Depending on different experiences, this was regarded as a positive or negative characteristic of the institutions by our informants. On the one hand, interviewees stress that strict rules might be abused to open up new ways of dealing with issues in institutional environments. On the other hand, informal interactions may privilege powerful subjects while less powerful ones are stripped of legal protection: “I don’t want even to mention doctors in hospitals. . . . So, naturally, if you know who you face with, it is one thing because the attitudes might be of any sort, but in Russia we depend on that, we do everything by connections. So, if you have a nanny who hates you, you can have big problems, while you are in a helpless patient state” (003).

Interviewees are afraid that some of their personality traits may be negatively evaluated by professionals in these institutions that are expected to provide necessary assistance. Homosexuality becomes one possible constraint on the way of smooth interaction with an institution because people are assumed to have prejudices against it. One subject stated that she was constantly interrogated by medical personnel about why she had no children and family at the age of 35. In other cases, there are systemic acts of open homophobia, such as in the case of people with HIV who are denied recognition as legally disabled and, consequently, denied access to benefits. For example, one interviewee said, “They refused to give me disability status by HIV. I’ve got disability status only when my leg was amputated and, besides, because of the sum of all the diseases I had had by then” (006). In effect, these conditions in medical institutions also produce solidarity among those who experience humiliation within such institutions: “This is just a senseless humiliation that makes your heart beat intact” (009).

There is no trust between the people and professionals. As our interviews show, state officials and medical specialists are suspicious about disabled people,
and that is why they tend to restrict access to medical care or welfare benefits; they think disabled people might want to have a wheelchair not because they want to move around the city, but because they want to sell it on the black market (018). For instance, this point is highlighted when one interviewee explained the state officials’ argument: “you are disabled, so stay home, why you need that ramp, just stay home, you have your monthly pension—it’s enough to have some minimum food and stay home for a month” (019). Mutual distrust informs relations between disabled people and institutions in contemporary Russia, and that is why many people seek to create alternative networks. Family is one such option. Family care is gendered in Russia, so mothers assume the role of primary caregivers and often assume the entire responsibility for their disabled children: “dad worked, yes, so that’s why mom left her job to, well, care for me” (022). Yet, mothers are also a source of danger, as another interviewee stated: “my mother could simply hit me when I was young, punch me, say ‘fuck off,’ and I would fall down” (014).

Due to poverty and general social precarity, the younger generations live with their parents for quite a long time, and this tendency is especially noticeable in the case of disabled people. This situation involves constant surveillance. In this way, family can be another oppressive institution for disabled people, especially queer disabled people. Homosexuality in many families is regarded as a tragedy, and coming out may result in violence. As one interviewee noted, “[My] mother and father express some kind of, eh, episodes of aggression towards me, many times I have had to deal with this. Eh, I was denied privacy or my own choice, em, they pressured me. So I have had to live through a lot of things” (010). Some of our interviewees say they do not come out to their families as queer out of “survival instinct” because they are dependent on their parents, afraid to disappoint them, and might lose their source of care. In the stories told to us, some families isolate, abuse, and restrict the access of queer disabled people to the public sphere. Certainly, these situations are not the only possible form of family relations. There are positive examples in which sexuality and disability are not regarded as circumstances for enabling violence but are seen just as a part of bigger picture of respectful interdependencies and relationships: “now my 69-year-old mom is like my best friend. I can tell her, for example: mom, I want a girl, or I want sex, mom, so let’s go to Petersburg [where lesbian life is more open and vivid]. So that’s how we roll!” (018).

Families as closed institutions might be opened as a result of queer relationship of a child. In one of the interviews, a subject noted that she established a friendship on the Internet with another lesbian from a different town. Eventually, that person moved to her town and the interviewee’s family helped her to find a job and accommodations. The family did not want to discuss sexuality especially when they started to live together, but the family supported their relationship. While together, they formed kinship relations of care: “You know, in our family, mom and granny do the work [of care] 50/50. Well, when I lived
Alexander Kondakov · 83

with that girl—we were together for four years—she also helped me a lot because we lived together” (016).

In this case, disabled LGBTIQ people are potentially resourceful for wide queer/crip kinship ties because they bring together an unpredictable set of relationships from at least two various communities and family—those who might not be imagined to align so easily but come together at this queer/crip point. As such, several accounts demonstrate that homophobic relatives and gay friends can enjoy a fruitful relationship united in a queer/crip kinship network. As one interviewee stated,

I do not hide that I’m gay, but neither do I disclose this. When I was 24 I gathered all my relatives together and informed them that I was gay. Later on, I also told them about my HIV status. In the very beginning they hated me, but then our relationship became normal and now we get along well. I stay home alone a lot, but my sister visits me often, and I also have a beloved person and permanent partners. We are in an open relationship with my spouse and we aren’t jealous of one another. (006)

The kinship network described here consists of relatives, a long-time romantic partner, and a number of other sexual partners. This network is mobilized to resolve different situations, including fights against state institutions and bureaucracy. The gay partners do not play a secondary role in this queer/crip kinship—they care as much as other contributors do. They also benefit from this kinship, as it is resourceful enough to find them a job or resolve other questions. These are the networks of queer/crip kinship that substantially provide for solutions to emotional and physical needs of its members. Moreover, membership is open to a variety of connections. Two interviewees with whom I spoke also stressed the importance of a guide dog and other animals in their lives—they have practical and emotional jobs, but they also benefit from being connected to their human companions. In fact, one of the interviewees explained she had deeper connections to the various animals in her life than to people: “Well, I sing on the streets [to make money], and my dog brings me there to sing. Eh, and since my childhood all my life has been related to dogs, to puppies, to street cats, all those, well, and, em, with cats—I communicated with cats more frequently than with people” (023).

These forms of interdependency may lead to political effects of queer/crip kinship. In Russia, where political activism takes forms of semiprivate inter-actions rather than conventional open protest (Kondakov 2014), this sort of queer politics is comprehensive. Another point about the political dimension of queer/crip kinship is that the ways it may be shaped also manifest political coalitions that project better futures. Queer/crip kinship is established when formal connections fail and the institutions are abusive: instead of following previously detected patterns such as institutional arrangements or blood descent, queer/crip kinship is based on social commonalities, political solidarity, and
emotional compassion. Its project of a better future is manifest in the forms of broad coalitions of those who are excluded and consequently come together in an act of resistance (Johnson 2015, 263). Consider the following words from one of our respondents:

We had a very good company because everyone was somehow queer but maintained a really open mind—there were people who were ready to discuss everything, no outcasts as such, well, eh, because this, certainly, this . . . even if you had a disease, well, disability and everything—it didn't matter because if disease was understood as ugliness, then we all were ugly each in our own way. (013)

This passage expands the effect of queer/crip kinship—an interdependence between the people involved—to an indefinite population, because everyone is ugly in their own way. As he says “ugly” (in Russian, urod), he also reappropriates the abusive term for political use and positive meaning; this is a new politics, the one “closer to bodies and movements that disrupt, dismantle, disturb,” as Mia Mingus puts it (2011). The word “ugly” is used to mark dissent from the standards of public appearance in Russia: when something is ugly, it means that something falls outside of tolerable state of appearance. In the quote above, and contrary to this vision, the term is transgressively employed as an indication of pride and solidarity, a refusal to think inside existing aesthetic standards. Moreover, this articulated sensation is what characterizes crip and queer theorizing with capacities to include as many subjects under these terms as possible. It is a political project that crip and queer theory serves and, thus, crip kinship performs: it is that dimension of queer/crip kinship that makes it environmental, atmospheric, and all-embracing.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I brought together experiences of disabled people who also identify as queer. In Russia, the particular political, social, and institutional context is especially important for understanding these experiences. I used the Shirtless Putin to point to a specific configuration of cohesive powers that make able-bodiedness, heterosexism, and misogyny an acknowledged, integral part of the government’s policies. The Shirtless Putin is a discourse that produces conditions of marginalization by making certain populations contagious and restricting their accessibility to the public sphere. On the level of practices, these policies result in extreme levels of compulsory isolation by legal and political means when certain populations are labeled contagious only for the purposes of marking their disposability. It is achieved by neoliberal welfare politics that aims to save money in order to pursue political goals that better fit masculinist ideology. Neoliberalism makes use of privatized institutions by transferring responsibility of care to families. This logic is reinforced by the institutional
organization of care that is driven by the presumption that the lives of disabled people should be minimally maintained. Meanwhile, home is a location of reproduction of unequal gender and sexual hierarchies where women are supposed to take full responsibility for familial care without emotional and/or monetary support from any source.

This situation marks queerness as both a site of fear and a location of difference. Queer experiences are regarded as contagious by the Russian government and, therefore, legally banned from public appearance. As policy makers believe, queerness is easily transmitted from one body to another by exposure to representations of LGBTIQ culture, activism, or everyday life. At the same time, our interviewees suggested that their queer disabled experience helped them to restructure current networks of kinship to expand them from family ties to sexual partners, activist communities, cats and dogs, and to all those “who are ugly in our own way.” This queer/crip kinship becomes a political location of resistance, where a variety of personal experiences come together to combat disposability and isolation. In this sense, it is a queer political strategy, but also a crip network of care because it provides for necessary sources that have become unavailable under conditions of neoliberal capitalism.

As a political strategy, queer/crip kinship has its pitfalls: it does not acknowledge those forms of politics that privilege visible activism. Queer/crip kinship may concentrate on its own network of relations without paying any particular attention to existing institutionalized powers or openly making demands of authorities. Ultimately, institutional authorities—such as the government—are of no relevance to the political goals achieved within queer/crip kinship networks. Certainly, this vision is vulnerable to social-democratic critique that such a politics too early disregards the potential of the state: perhaps, state institutions can still offer valuable support for people if we manage to reform those institutions (Cooper 2016). Can we still trust the state as a form that may be adjusted to people’s needs instead of current needs of neoliberal capitalism? Or should we look for other experiences that propose a different future beyond the usual forms offered by the state? These questions are to be explored further in attempts to see what crip and queer theorizing might offer.

Queer/crip kinship is a denial of the rules of appearance (Butler 2015) on which politics of contagion rests: it deploys queer/crip terms of taking pride in ugliness in order to produce the principle of interdependence and relationships with the others. The ugliness does not refer to actual standards of aesthetic appearance here, but simply marks logic of going beyond existing standards and of appropriating meanings of words to enact a different—positive—thinking. Queer/crip kinship is not about ugliness; it is about imagining a different future that could be built. Within this conceptualization, the queer/crip kinship is a threat to both neoliberalism that established conditions of isolation and to the traditional family as a vehicle for neoliberal techniques of restraining access to public appearances.
The interview experiences I highlighted are marginal. We collected stories of almost two dozen people, but only some of them presented their life experiences as potentially open to better futures. Many stories articulated experiences of oppression, violence, poverty, fear, humiliation, and other feelings generated by the discourses of disposability that are attached to populations deemed contagious. Here, my aim has been to bring the promise of queer/crip kinship to light. Drawing from the lives of people at the crossroads of assemblages of oppression, we become subjected to the urgent need for new theories, new vocabularies, and new kinships to drive Shirtless Putin away in his every form and from every location.

Alexander Kondakov is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science and Sociology at the European University at St. Petersburg and researcher at the Centre for Independent Social Research in St. Petersburg, Russia. He is also the deputy editor-in-chief for the Journal of Social Policy Studies published by the Higher School of Economics in Moscow. Currently, he is a Wisconsin Russia Project Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. For a decade, Kondakov’s work has been primarily focused on law and sexuality studies, more specifically on queer sexualities in Russia. He is the author of the report on hate crimes against queers in Russia that has shown the rise of violence after the adoption of the gay propaganda bill. He has also published articles in Canadian Journal of Law and Society, Social and Legal Studies, and Feminist Legal Studies, among others.

Acknowledgments

This article would not have been possible without initial research that was financed by the Russian LGBT Network. Thank you to all who participated in the research, including Evgeny Shtorn, Ekaterina Ivanova, Cassandra Hartblay, Alexandra Dmitrieva, and others who cannot be named. I also want to thank administration of Sidur Museum in Moscow who organized the 2016 panel where preliminary results of this study were presented. I express my gratitude to Robert McRuer and David Mitchell for being able to present this work at George Washington University in 2016. And I thank Alex Moshkin, as well as the anonymous reviewers and editors, Kelly Fritsch and Anne McGuire.

Notes

1. The “propaganda law” is a censorship legislation that stops certain information from circulating; it bans political leaflets or websites, movies and TV shows, newspaper articles and concerts.

2. I employ the “we” in order to politically distance myself from those who are represented by the Shirtless Putin and also to invite the readers into a coalitional network. This “we” should not be read as an attempt to appropriate the representation.
of the oppressed. I use it as an indication of my political sympathy and as an invitation to one possible coalition of resistance.

3. In Russia, “queer” may be referred to as “kvir” or “pidor,” both referencing various ideas of the original term. Kvir simply adopts the English version by transliteration, while pidor establishes an analogy with the Russian derogatory term for male homosexual persons. Both these invocations of queer try to facilitate the adaptation of an already existing conception. My use of “queer” describes some realities of Russia without claiming the final truth about its use. I use the concept so as to be open to new interpretation while holding the logic of its etymology.

### List of interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Disability</th>
<th>Sexuality</th>
<th>Year of Birth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>001</td>
<td>Asperger syndrome</td>
<td>Asexual</td>
<td>1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>002</td>
<td>2nd group in general disabilities</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>003</td>
<td>Difficulties in speech</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>1981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>004</td>
<td>Cerebral palsy</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>1985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>005</td>
<td>3rd group</td>
<td>Gay (&quot;a homosexual&quot;)</td>
<td>1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>006</td>
<td>1st group, amputation, HIV</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>1971</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>007</td>
<td>Psychoneurological disability</td>
<td>Trans*, gay, slightly intersex</td>
<td>1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>008</td>
<td>Vision limitations</td>
<td>Transgender, gay</td>
<td>1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>009</td>
<td>Birth trauma</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>1986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>010</td>
<td>2nd group, schizoid type disorder</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>011</td>
<td>Paralysis after stroke</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>1984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>012</td>
<td>Cerebral palsy</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>1980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>013</td>
<td>Trauma from suicidal attempt</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>014</td>
<td>Paralysis</td>
<td>Bi</td>
<td>1956</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>015</td>
<td>Cerebral palsy</td>
<td>Bi</td>
<td>1990s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>016</td>
<td>Kugelberg Welander spinal muscular atrophy</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>017</td>
<td>Myopathy-muscular dystrophy</td>
<td>Bi</td>
<td>1985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>018</td>
<td>Bacteria in spine</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>1971</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>019</td>
<td>Multiple sclerosis</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>1983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>020</td>
<td>2nd group</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>1968</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>021</td>
<td>Mental disorder</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>022</td>
<td>Girl on wheels</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>1981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>023</td>
<td>Sightlessness</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>1987</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### References


Alexander Kondakov · 89


90 · Feminist Formations 30.1


