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"Hashtag wheels on fire": Crip/Queer Sexualities and Access Intimacies in Michael Southan's *Kerbs*

ABSTRACT

Michael Southan's *Kerbs* (2022) explores the problematic nature of dating for young wheelchair-users, discussing the complexities of disability intimacy (García-Santesmases) and different geographies for disability sexuality (Siebers). Beginning with an explicit exchange on disabled dating application projected on the screen, the play develops into a commentary on difficulty of negotiating time and place for a new relationship in a disabling environment. My aim in this article is to examine the intersections of crip and queer theories and to consider their applicability to the study of disability intimacy and its representation in disability drama. I will address the aspects of disability intimacies that either point to the connections between crip and queer sexualities or present moments when crip and queer sexualities coincide, despite contextual differences. I build my conceptual framework around the argument on the affinities between queer and crip challenges to compulsory heteronormativity and able-bodiedness developed, among others, by Robert McRuer as well as Tobin Siebers's reflections on disability as a sexual minority and sexual citizenship. In this context, I will investigate the tensions that Southan's play presents between normate expectations and conceptions of sexuality, on the one hand, and disability intimacy and access intimacy that define crip sexualities, on the other.

Keywords: crip/queer intimacy, disability sexuality, access intimacy, digital intimacy, intersectionality.

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to examine the intersections of crip and queer theories and to consider their applicability to the study of disabled intimacy and its representation in disability drama. Taking an essentially heterosexual crip romantic story told by Michael Southan in his 2022 play *Kerbs* as a case study, I will address the aspects of disability intimacies that either point to the connections between crip and queer sexualities or present moments when crip and queer sexualities coincide, despite contextual differences. I build my conceptual framework around the argument on the affinities between queer and crip challenges to compulsory heteronormativity and able-bodiedness developed, among others, by Robert McRuer ("Compulsory" and "Introduction") as well as Tobin Siebers's reflections on disability as a "sexual minority" (136) and the problem of sexual citizenship, taking detours to contextualise some of these concerns in crip/queer and disability activism referenced in the play. In this context, I will investigate the tensions between "normate" (Garland-Thomson 8) expectations and conceptions of sexuality, on the one hand, and disability intimacy and intimate access that define crip sexualities, on the other. As a type of non-normative sexuality, disability sexuality is characterised by increased vulnerability and exposure as well as insecurity and lack of privacy, but it also offers alternative ways of feeling and experiencing pleasure. Crip intimacy strongly depends on access intimacy—a concept based on disability justice and ethical responsiveness (Valentine)—both of which are linked to solidarity and care. *Kerbs* by Michael Southan problematises all of these concerns, showing, on the one hand, a struggle for autonomy and safety, and on the other, the need to re-think and expand intimacy into cooperative and often intersectional endeavour that demands new spatial and interpersonal relations.

Kerbs was first staged in 2022 as a co-production of Graeae and Belgrade Theatre in Coventry for Coventry UK City of Culture 2021. With its "rich history of inclusion" and contribution to the emergence of theatre-in-education, Belgrade Theatre has been committed to diversity, collaboration, and service to the local community ("About Us"). Graeae theatre is dedicated to "creat[ing] political platforms through artistic engagement" for people with disabilities ("Our History"). Graeae sees itself as "a force for change in world-class theatre, breaking down barriers, challenging preconceptions, championing diversity across the sector and boldly placing Deaf, disabled and neurodivergent artists centre stage" ("Graeae" 18). The author of *Kerbs*, Michael Southan, is a playwright and poet with cerebral palsy using a power chair and an alumnus of Graeae Theatre's "Write To Play" project. *Kerbs*, as the author says, was started

as the final assignment that he was given in the Graeae's project and developed into a full-length play. The play was staged after the lockdown period and was thought to be a good choice for the return to theatres thereafter. When answering the question "Why is *Kerbs* important?," Michael Southan explained:

> *Kerbs* is about two people looking for a connection and I think after the two years we've had, I look forward to people connecting together in a theatre and watching a story play out in front of us. *Kerbs* also puts a disabled narrative front and centre, and to me that's the most important thing. ("Interview" 7)

Acknowledging both of these contexts—the post-pandemic need for connection and centrality of the disabled narrative—as significant, I will examine how navigating space in *Kerbs*—both physical and social—for people with disabilities demands redefining privacy and intimacy, as well as the relation between independence and dependence. I will focus on the character of Lucy, a 24-year-old wheelchair user living with her mother, who struggles with her misconceptions of independence and ideals of non-disabled love, and who learns during the course of the play to accept the difference of disability sexuality and intimacy.

Kerbs presents this process in several stages, each featuring complications characteristic of the conventional romantic plot structure, based on misunderstandings and conflicts between Lucy and David, a 26-year-old student using a wheelchair, as well as obstacles, both physical and psychological, leading to a postponed happy ending. It is important, however, that these complications result from or are further complexified by lack of access and accessibility, beginning with physical access (the titular kerbs), and finishing with a failure to go beyond it to cater for more complex needs forming access intimacy (including the psychological implications of access to a disposable plastic straw in a pub or personal assistance). We watch the characters through the stages of searching for a partner on the dating application (dedicated to users with disabilities), the kerbs accident during the first date, and increased control from Lucy's mother after her brief stay in hospital as a result. This, in turn, leads to exacerbating problems with finding safe and accessible space for intimate encounters. A trip to a seaside caravan, intended to be a solution, initially only increases the tensions and misunderstandings between the couple, before being unexpectedly resolved in—paradoxically enough—the "public" space of an accessible toilet. The play ends with the couple planning another trip to celebrate David being awarded a doctoral degree, and arranging for their lesbian family friend to assist them once again.

In what follows, I will begin my discussion by elucidating the connections between crip and queer sexualities, while focusing on the features of disability sexuality that make it alternative to mainstream sexualities. The second major theoretical context will be formed by theories of disability intimacy and access intimacy, defining alternative ways of being with each other and responding to complex access needs. In my discussion of *Kerbs*, I will first focus on domains in which crip and queer sexualities and intimacies converge, mostly by exploring alternative intimate geographies in order to trace ways of opposing marginalisation and erasure. These geographies will embrace both physical and digital spaces. I will then examine how the play addresses the problem of crip and access intimacies, focusing first on the positive effects of relational and intersectional care and then presenting the negative impact of disregarding more complex access needs, in the context of eco-ableism and disability activism.

CRIP/QUEER IDENTITIES AND SEXUALITIES

The general theoretical context for my discussion comes from Robert McRuer's observation on the deep roots of prejudice and stigmatisation that connect the history and present experiences of ableism and gender discrimination. In his 2020 essay on compulsory able-bodiedness (which is a commentary on his 2002 publication on the same subject), McRuer points to the parallels between queer and crip identities by noticing that "an attention to . . . gender trouble is always already haunted by ability trouble" ("Compulsory" 64). While building on the earlier developments in queer (and also feminist) theory, the discussion on discrimination and marginalisation caused by compulsory able-bodiedness is seen as instrumental in understanding the roots and mechanisms of all stigmatisation and silencing. Able-bodiedness and its connections to queer theory became for McRuer the foundations for what was called "*crip theory*, a project that draws on artistic, activist, and academic reclamations and reinventions of the word *crip*" (62). The concept of "queer/disabled existence" was seen as "a form of resistance to compulsory able-bodiedness" (63). In his commentary on the mutual definitions of queer and crip identities in homophobic and ableist contexts,[1] McRuer insists on the necessity to combine crip and queer perspectives to effectively oppose "the ongoing, performative consolidation of both heterosexual and

[1] McRuer comments on how disability is always "a bit" queer and queerness—"a bit disabled" ("Compulsory" 63).

able-bodied dominance" (ibid.), while "accessing in the process new ways of thinking, feeling, and being in common" (66) and "imagining bodies and desires otherwise" ("Introduction" 32). Being together in difference and imagining alternative corporealities provide an important general context for the relationships presented in Southan's play, the characters' solidarity but also their cultural and social marginalisation.

For Tobin Siebers, the analogies and connections between queer and disabled sexualities mostly concern the struggle for the recognition and rights of disabled people "as a sexual minority" (148). In *Disability Theory*, he notes an important tendency emerging among people with disabilities to claim "a sexual culture" in which disability is seen "not as a defect that needs to be overcome to have sex but as a complex embodiment that enhances sexual activities and pleasure" (ibid.). Siebers highlights the differences between normative and disabled sex, emphasising that "disabled people may advance a different sexual geography both for the body and the places where the bodies express their sexuality" (152). For discussion of *Kerbs* the latter, in particular, will be significant: "reorganiz[ing] places inhabited by bodies as locations for sexual culture" (ibid.). This will include physical space readjustments as well as online intimacies, many of which show important analogies to how other minorities use space and communication channels, or how they have been ghettoised. In her study on "Intimate Discrimination," Elizabeth F. Emens comments on the presence (or rather absence) of people with disabilities on dating websites, stating that "[d]isability is almost entirely absent from the mainstream dating websites, suggesting . . . its assumed importance (that is, its status as disqualifying). . . . Marginal dating sites fill the gap for disabled people and, in so doing, articulate the exclusion felt by disabled people on the mainstream sites" (1326). This exclusion also creates a meaningful context for *Kerbs* and its problematisation of sexual marginalisation.

Another important context for the spatial reordering of crip intimacy is what Siebers describes as the need for transferring citizens' rights to places where people can or want to enter sexual relationships. Here Siebers comments on the use of the public accessible toilet, where the disabled and assistant relation is a way of camouflaging sexual intimacies (152). Accessible toilets have also connected people with disabilities and other minority groups, such as transgender and transsexual people, turning into what Alison Kafer calls, referring to Judith Plaskow's research on the significance of public toilets, "sites of intersectional study and activism" (154) and "queercrip alliances" (155). In her *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Kafer examines the importance of public accessible toilets not only to people with disabilities, but other

identities not included in the binary gender division of sanitary spaces: "with disabled people and disability movements working to undo the gendered conventions of the toilet as part of our larger struggles for access to public space" (156–57).

With reference to how disability sexuality differs from the normative one, Siebers also notes that disability sexuality rejects many myths and expectations of normative sexuality, such as spontaneity, which might result from the need for extensive preparations, taking into account the limited access to privacy that some people may experience and the need for "arrangements with personal attendants" (150). Referring to multiple examples, Siebers shares an important "consideration" that people with disabilities should not "judge their sexuality by comparison to normative sexuality" (151). This issue is also emphasised by Kirsty Liddiard in her 2018 book *The Intimate Lives of Disabled People*, which is a collection of stories told by disabled people about their sexual lives: the attitudes to forms of assistance or even more so—sexual support—often reflect "the ableist myth of the sexually self-sufficient and self-governing body" (3). Referring to Hilary Brown (125), García-Santesmases et al. observe that "[s]exuality has been a paradigmatic area of oppression for people with functional diversity who have been placed in two equally stereotyped categories: oversexed perverts or asexual innocents" (270).[2] Liddiard points to an important aspect of disabled sexuality, suggesting that caught between these polar opposites people with disabilities are thought to be in need of protection and control. Part of this approach, as Liddiard further notes, is connected with the denial of disabled sexuality based on the belief in their "passive, vulnerable and childlike" nature (3) or "asexual objectification" discussed by Garland-Thomson after Harlan Hahn (25). Disabled sexuality could thus be seen as something shocking and abnormal (Liddiard 3), which makes access to intimacy particularly problematic, also for the main character of *Kerbs*, living with her mother, who is her personal assistant on an everyday basis. All these considerations will be of particular importance in the discussion of the main character's initial romantic expectations, based on myths and preconceptions about disability intimacy and sexuality, as well as the process through which she negotiates her independence and comes to accept assistance.

[2] Kirsty Liddiard also emphasises that while "most disabled people are assumed to lack the capabilities and capacities to embody sexuality, sensuality, expression and desire" (1), some of them are often perceived as "hypersexual" and thus "in need of containment" (2). Liddiard points out that the concept of disabled asexuality differs largely from the present self-definition of being asexual and is a product of ableist and disableist attitudes (1–2).

DISABILITY INTIMACY AND ACCESS INTIMACY

The way that the difference of disability sexuality is presented in *Kerbs* involves an alternative perspective on intimacy, going beyond romantic love, on the one hand, and responding to the needs of people with disabilities that are not limited to simple access, on the other. These aspects are considered here with reference to theories of disability intimacies by Alice Wong and the discussion of access intimacies by Desiree Valentine, Mia Mingus, and Andrea García-Santesmases Fernández. In her introduction to *Disability Intimacies: Essays on Love, Care, and Desire*, Alice Wong argues that "[i]ntimacy is more than sex or romantic love. Intimacy is an ever-expanding universe composed of a myriad heavenly bodies. Intimacy is about relationships within a person's self, with others, with communities, with nature, and beyond" (xviii). In this broad concept of intimacy, disability sexuality can be considered as relational and intersubjective. While the main focus in Southan's play is on romantic and sexual intimacies, these expand to include other relationalities, particularly those with the family friend and assistant, whose role will be discussed in further sections.

Similarly, from a broader perspective, access involves not only physical accessibility—"what we might call logistical, accommodationist access"—but, as Desiree Valentine notes, "appreciat[ing] the depths of access-related issues" (77). Access intimacy is based on "an ongoing, interpersonal process of relating and taking responsibility for our inevitable encroachment on each other"; it "invites attention to our . . . intersubjectivity, . . . vulnerability, and the asymmetries of power in any relationship" (78). Access intimacy is particularly important in the relationship between a disabled person and their assistant, and operates in both directions, taking into consideration the complex and problematic nature of power relationships. For a disabled person, as Valentine observes in her discussion of the essay "Access Intimacy: The Missing Link" by Mia Mingus and her later texts, access intimacy means "the feeling of someone genuinely understanding and anticipating another person's access needs," which is opposed to "a rights-based framework of accessibility that prioritizes the logistics of access" (82).

With reference to Southan's play, this important difference will be addressed in positive terms in the discussion of the assistance the main characters receive in an intimate situation from their friend; in a critical context, the difference is exposed in how many places the characters use are designed to cater only for the most basic physical access needs. As a result, the play shows the difference between how physically accessible spaces are used by "fitter" persons with disabilities (like David), while others might need more fully accessible solutions (Lucy). This distinction illustrates

an important redefinition of positionality in access intimacy, "demanding abled people inhabit the world of disabled individuals rather than better 'fitting' disabled individuals within the abled world" (Valentine 81–82). Finally, what also seems significant in the way *Kerbs* presents intimacy is how it builds a strong, positive, and rewarding interconnection between the characters involved. As Mingus explains, the feeling one experiences in access intimacy is not based on "charity," but it is "a freeing, light, loving feeling. It brings the people who are a part of it closer; it builds and deepens connection."

CRIP/QUEER GEOGRAPHIES IN *KERBS*

The way in which space is navigated in *Kerbs* points to significant analogies between how people with disabilities may use space—both physical and digital—and how other discriminated groups have been forced to manage their erotic lives, including dating. This redefinition illustrates a different geography of sexuality and intimacy for people with disabilities mentioned by Siebers, pointing, in general, to a different use of space by marginalised groups because of various forms of discrimination, going beyond physical access. This is partly connected to the secrecy and invisibility of disability sexuality, on the one hand, and lack of accessible intimate spaces, on the other. In my discussion, I will focus on the redefinitions of public and private spaces as well as on the significance of online communication for people with limited mobility and restricted access to privacy, including the first scene of the play, which establishes the marginal position of the characters in relation to the able-bodied mainstream.

An important part of crip/queer geographies in *Kerbs* is the redefinition of physical space, including how homely and intimate spaces become public, and vice versa. Ironic reversals are most spectacular and resonant with meaning on two occasions—first when the private home becomes public through online communication and then when a public facility becomes an intimate, yet illegal, environment for a sexual encounter. The latter scene, more crucial for the discussion of crip/queer spaces and their tendency to represent a different sexual geography, takes place towards the end of the play, in a public toilet. After an argument and a game of laser quest, Lucy and David finally feel ready to be together, while the only private place they can occupy at this moment is a large, fully accessible and clean public toilet with a hoist. With the help of a family friend (to be discussed further in this article) and the hoist, the couple manage to finally have sex that is described in stage directions as "brilliant" and "[a]lmost like a ballet" (Southan, *Kerbs* 63).

The love scene in a public toilet resonates with important implications. As it is legally forbidden to have sex in a public toilet, the characters' intimacy becomes transgressive, echoing the tendency to see disability sexuality as transgressive, but also pointing to the significance of alternative spaces for marginalised intimacies.[3] The accessible toilet, as has already been suggested, functions as a symbolic space for non-normate identities and sexual minorities. According to the play's theatre director, Nickie Miles-Wildin, "using an accessible toilet for pleasure" is one of the play's main themes (8). In practical terms, the sanitary space offers an alternative to the caravan that was supposed to be their romantic weekend shelter, but did not meet Lucy's expectations. Being old and rather dirty, the caravan was also not accessible and demanded the personal assistant's presence.

The toilet scene comments on the effectiveness of public spaces' physical accessibility, and the ineffectiveness of solutions for intimate spaces. This is what Valentine observes in her earlier-mentioned study, noting how logistics overshadow other, more complex accessibility needs. This bias is particularly visible in disregarding more complex needs in which other forms of accessibility matter. The "pristine" toilet scene also contrasts with an earlier accident that Lucy had in a toilet (inadequate, dirty, unlockable) on a train when going to the seaside, which also reveals the tendency to limit accessibility only to technical solutions without taking into consideration the psychological needs and practicalities that form part of access intimacy (being able to see the space from a disabled person's position).

In the second situation, demonstrating private/public space reversals (chronologically prior to the toilet scene), which occurs at the beginning of the lovers' acquaintance, Lucy and David arrive at Lucy's flat, thinking that her mother has gone out to a party. Believing that they are alone, they enter the dark flat "in a state of undress" (Southan, *Kerbs* 15), when all of the sudden the lights are switched on, revealing not only the people waiting for her at home but many more turning on their cameras and microphones on Zoom to greet Lucy at the party to celebrate her return from the hospital. The scene presents an increased level of vulnerability and the oppressiveness of the home as a childhood space for Lucy, one in which she cannot negotiate privacy. Living with her mother, who also acts as a personal assistant to her on an everyday basis, turns her into a dependent

[3] Desperate to find an intimate place before the trip, when Lucy is kept captive at home by her mother because of her earlier misbehaviour, the couple speculate about the possibility of using the public toilet for this purpose, playing quite daring erotic games:

"DAVID: '*Evening babe, asking for a friend, is it legal to have sex in a public toilet?*'

LUCY: '*Googling. . . . Tell your friend *crying/laughing face emoji* outlawed under section 73 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003*' (text messages in screen reader voice)" (Southan, *Kerbs* 27).

person, more childish and childlike, whose coming of age is delayed not only because of her mother's fears and control but also because of her own projections of her mother's expectations. This accounts for her feeling that her sexuality is "a bit" illicit and closeted, before her coming out as sexually active in the conversation with her mother after weeks of being forbidden to leave home alone.[4] Although part of the home's oppressiveness is based on Lucy's mistaken belief in her mother's opposition to her sexual relationships, she tries to keep her relationship with David a secret.

The use of a dating application by Lucy and David as well as their subsequent exchanges of texted messages also invite important comments on crip-queer spaces, disability intimacy, as well as crip digital intimacy. It is worth noting that digital communication features strongly in the performance stage design, with both dating application exchanges and communicator messages projected onto the back wall. Amanda Mascarenhas, the show's stage designer, explained: "I was highly inspired by apps and the sleek design of the icons. We wanted to bring the swift nature of digital software into the show" (14). My first observation concerning the digital communication in *Kerbs* is connected to how marginalised sexualities use less visible or unexposed forms of communication and matching. For people with disabilities, as well as members of other minorities, the web has offered an alternative to the "conventional social spaces," to which they have had "restricted access" (Kuppers 111).

The opening scene critiques the wider tendency to exclude people with disabilities from mainstream dating websites, by first showing on the screen: "*Lucy on non-disabled dating app . . . being ghosted or trolled/ fetishised*" (Southan, *Kerbs* 3). Despite technical accessibility, the non-disabled dating application does not allow Lucy to connect to a partner, or even to try searching, because she is rejected by others or objectified through fetishisation. After a while, the screen shows Lucy on the disabled dating app, with an almost immediate response from the match—David. While the whole play is dedicated to the exploration of the young disabled people's relationship, beginning with the non-disabled dating site is an important definition of the environment in which the love story is developed—the ableist or disableist society.

The first scene largely reflects the results of the study conducted by Elizabeth F. Emens and described in the aforementioned "Intimate Discrimination." Emens notes that "[d]isability is almost entirely absent from the mainstream dating websites," which implies "its status as disqualifying" (1326). In contrast, "[m]arginal dating sites" offer a meeting

[4] This is caused by an accident she had after her first date with David; having drunk too much, she hits a kerb, falls off the wheelchair, and hurts her wrist.

space for people with disabilities but "in so doing, articulate the exclusion felt by disabled people" elsewhere (ibid.). While the story developed in *Kerbs* never returns to this problem, it is an important context in which we, as audience or readers, are confronted with the marginal positioning of disabled persons as users of dating applications, in particular, and as sexual citizens, in general.

With reference to marginalised sexualities, as well as the problem with access to privacy, Lucy and David start dating quickly, without getting to know each other well. This is mostly imposed by Lucy, who has very little time alone and can hardly ever go out without her mother's knowledge. Because of secrecy and urgency, their communication on a dating application is very explicit and straightforward, beyond what especially Lucy can actually manage in face-to-face communication. Filled with suggestive emojis, the messages reflect what could be seen as spontaneity and desire (e.g., "a quickie in the quickie"[5]), but, from another perspective, demonstrate the alternative temporalities that intimacy entails for characters with restricted mobility and freedom (being partly relegated to mediated communication).

The second comment pertaining to digital communication concerns the context of technological affordances, in particular their "mechanisms." By crip digital intimacy, Johnson et al. mean "the relational connections and affects that spring from the ways disabled people approach and relate to each other within digital spaces" (6). In their discussion of Jenny Davis's study of affordances, Johnson et al. define mechanisms of affording as "the ways that technologies '*request*, *demand*, *encourage*, *discourage*, *refuse*, and *allow* particular lines of action and social dynamics'" (17). When considered in the context of technological affordances, online applications and communicators in *Kerbs* not only offer technical opportunities to the characters but also prescribe certain forms of relational connections that are expected from their users. The dating application, for instance, encourages more forward attitudes and explicit expressions, which later shape the characters' exchanges when texting messages or even in face-to-face conversations.

As Mark Fisher in his *Guardian* review aptly notes, "texts [in *Kerbs*] are heavy on innuendo, every winky face matched by an aubergine emoji. They are witty and sexually assured." The explicitly erotic language that the characters use on the application is then transferred to other exchanges. Hashtags used on messaging apps are also spoken by the characters in a face-to-face conversation, such as "Hashtag wheels on fire" (Southan, *Kerbs* 5), "Hashtag DavidIsOnFire," or "Hashtag CoolMeDown" (26). As

[5] A pun on a type of wheelchair and a quick drink or sex (Southan, *Kerbs* 3).

the plot develops, it becomes evident that the characters do not keep pace with their projected digital selves. Part of the story presented in *Kerbs* is about the process of catching up with and redefining this projection, as in face-to-face situations dating proves to be much more complicated and involves assistance from others.

Yet another important aspect of digital communication presented onstage is its ability to make the performance itself accessible through audiodescription (when the characters are texting) and captioning (when the characters are speaking). The characters seem to inhabit this inclusive space in which switching the medium of communication comes naturally. "Code switching" is thus as much a feature of the main characters' relationship as it is part of inclusive communication in theatre. Accessibility is not added to the existing play in performance but is aesthetically inherent in its modes of communication and structure. In this respect, *Kerbs*—with its captioning and audiodescription as well as an easily modifiable and accessible stage design for wheelchair-using actors—integrates disability aesthetics with access.[6] It posits a different perception of theatre space, which, as Kirsty Johnston suggests, "has a long connection to the ideology of ability" (81).

ACCESS INTIMACY IN *KERBS*

In my discussion of how access intimacy is problematised in *Kerbs*, I will focus on two aspects of relationality: personal assistance (linked to intersectionality) and eco-ability/eco-ableism, both of which are connected through the concepts of care and anticipation of one's needs, or lack thereof. As mentioned before, one of the major problems addressed in the play is Lucy's preconceptions about sexuality and romantic relationships, partly based on ableist notions. What she feels is the pressure to be spontaneous, on the one hand, and erotically appealing, on the other. In both, she wishes to enter the relationship as an independent lover, refusing to accept David's assistance. Part of the solution to this is asking a family friend, Toni, to accompany Lucy and David during their weekend at the

[6] In her chapter on universal design and its applicability in disability theatre, Bree Hadley describes this type of theatre as the one that "would incorporate accessibility into the performance as an integral part of the aesthetic, rather than as interpretations, captions or descriptions that run alongside" ("A 'Universal Design'" 183). *Kerbs* avoids the problem raised by Hadley in her study, namely being "co-opted by non-disabled artists and/or audiences" (186) in situations when they severed from "the physicality, phenomenological intentionality, and perspectives that disabled people deploy in their day-to-day lives" (Hadley, "Participation" 166).

seaside. While the play does not raise the issue of care assistance, it does insist on how intimacy differs for a person who needs help when entering a love relationship.

The whole trip to the seaside with Toni shows the nuances and complexities of access intimacy and crip intimacy, with attention given to the needs, vulnerabilities, and power relations between all three participants. This is particularly visible in how Toni manages her position in relation to the lovers, how she anticipates what their needs are and remains in the margins so as not to dominate them as a non-disabled person. Toni is a lesbian friend of Lucy's mother, who has recently lost her disabled wife, Christine, and is still mourning. Her decision to help Lucy and David requires her to confront her loss and grief, as Minehead is the place where Christine proposed to her years ago. With her "experience of caring" and being "wonderful with Christine, right to the end" (Southan, *Kerbs* 33), Toni can understand Lucy's uncertainty and vulnerability. When Lucy is getting ready for a romantic evening in the caravan, Toni tries to reassure her, assists her in all the preparations, and gently advises her on what to do, using humour to decrease her tension and stress. She also feels the importance of the event, is compassionate and empathetic. In a sense, Toni is also instrumental in bringing in the motif of alternative geographies of crip/queer sexualities by telling Lucy a story of her erotic adventure during a political meeting when she was young. Therefore, intimacy in *Kerbs* is shown as both private/individual and relational, linked to other people's experience and feelings, engaging all of them in supporting one another and showing their understanding of each other's needs. It also brings together memories of lesbian love and the development of a new disabled relationship.

Toni's assistance to both Lucy and David also exposes the difference in disability intimacy for its complex logistics. In an interview, Southan observes:

> As much as it is a love story, I think it's also a play about logistics, the logistics of a romantic relationship when disability is a factor, sharing space with non-disabled people and the very literal sense of moving from one place to another. It allowed me to write about what living with a disability can be like. (7)

Toni's preparations for the trip resemble getting ready for a scouting expedition or "taking industrial action at a moment's notice," when she was "a union organiser back in the early eighties" (Southan, *Kerbs* 40). In a way, this attitude plays with the idea of logistics, both exposing its significance and simultaneously exaggerating it to the point of comedy. Toni's decision to communicate with the two lovers by a walkie-talkie is initially viewed by Lucy

as childish and embarrassing. However, as it turns out later, using a walkie-talkie proves to be extremely helpful in preserving distance and being invisible while remaining "ready to hand," when she is needed. In the "toilet" scene, Toni appears "[a]s if by magic" (62), just seconds after she is summoned via a walkie-talkie to help with the hoist. Directing some of the lovers' embarrassment to herself, showing enthusiasm and commitment, getting ready for the romantic weekend the way one prepares for protest action—all these strategies help to reduce the young people's insecurity and uncertainty, ignore their own emotional clumsiness, and get ready for making an effort to succeed. Toni thus represents a form of care on which access intimacy relies, by seeing the world from the disabled perspective and identifying particular needs, meeting those needs in advance, and finding help a source of pleasure.

The other aspect of access intimacy, this time related to eco-ableism and eco-ability, is foregrounded in the plastic straw scene. On the primary level, the scene presents a situation in which people with disabilities can access places physically, but cannot have full access to the activities that are practised in those places. This is a situation in which access intimacy occurs only between the disabled characters, while in the outside world, access is limited only to "the logistics of access," disregarding other access needs. On one of their dates, Lucy and David drink wine in a bar from wine glasses. Lucy has a problem drinking her wine without a straw, spilling it because of her shaking hands. When asked whether David should inquire about a straw for her, she responds: "I checked, the only ones they have are those small ones that fall into your glass. I questioned them about it and the man looked at me like I'd shouted 'Screw the Turtles'" (Southan, *Kerbs* 26). Viewing a straw problem as important to people with disabilities is a step towards understanding that, on certain occasions, it allows them to preserve personal dignity in a public place and in front of a lover. It also points to the fact that the physical accessibility of a café or bar is not sufficient because of other vulnerabilities and needs that are more complex and that demand reflection and care.

This exchange also points to the larger problem of eco-ableism, and references disabled activism against the plastic straws ban. Lucy's reference to the campaign to save turtles and other sea animals from the danger posed by plastic waste, in particular plastic straws, is followed by the hashtags exchange: "Hashtag DisabledExtinction" and "Hashtag SurvivalOfTheFittest" (ibid.). The couple start communicating in hashtags, appropriating environmental discourse to signal the precarity of their position and expose the inequity at the intersection of disability and climate.[7]

[7] The way the two characters use the crisis rhetoric in the scene in a way draws the connection between the fate of endangered species and people with disabilities.

This is a problematic moment when the needs of disabled people are in conflict with eco-friendly trends, with disabled people being "otherniz[ed] by vanguard of academics and activists" (Schatz et al. xxii–xxiii).

As suggested by J. L. Schatz et al., environmental or social activism often "produce[s] hostile spaces" that marginalise people with disabilities: "This happens when ecological or social justice movements call on individuals to curb environmental consumption when such consumption is often necessary for survival and overcoming self-hatred" (xxii). The authors suggest a different approach, which they call "eco-ability": "eco-ability does not place pressure on individuals for the politics of environmental purity. Rather, it calls for diverse relational tactics" (ibid.). A relational community, as the authors further explain, implies a shared and supportive network of connections in which responsibility is distributed among its members. With the awareness that "[p]eople with disabilities are at increased risk of the adverse impacts of climate change, including threats to their health, food security, access to water energy, and sanitation, and livelihoods, particularly in developing countries" (United Nations Development Program), it is important to acknowledge that they might be unable to reduce their individual negative impact on climate due to such factors as increased electricity consumption or technologies that they need to live (Schatz et al. xxii–xxiii).

The comments on the straw problem and hashtags exchanged in *Kerbs* allude to the straw ban and its consequences for people with disabilities, referencing disabled activists' protests. In an activist context, the situation depicted in *Kerbs* can illustrate a more general change of the status of disabled individuals into those in need of help. In her critical commentary entitled "The Rise and Fall of the Plastic Straw: Sucking in Crip Defiance," Alice Wong describes the consequences of this change in ways that are closely applicable to Southan's play: "The power dynamic shifts from a consumer who has access to a straw as they would a napkin or fork to a situation where individuals must disclose a need of some sort when requesting one with wait staff or bartenders who become de facto gatekeepers of access" (6). Similarly, the man's reaction to Lucy's query represents a larger tendency to judge people with disabilities by their need to use plastic straws, perceiving them as harmful and unethical. Wong poignantly comments on a similar situation in reality: "The withholding and hiding of plastic straws in public spaces sends a message that people who use them are deviant consumers marked with a number of moralistic labels (e.g., wasteful, turtle killer, irresponsible). Its aim is to make our worlds smaller and less accessible" (7).

Reading the straw scene thus yields a number of interpretations, placing the single incident in the characters' lives in an activist and political context

of seeing the straw bans—and on a larger scale popular "environmentalism that shames disabled people"—as "ableist and exclusionary" (ibid.).[8] Like the toilet scene, the one featuring the straw problem adds important activist contexts to everyday situations, pointing to the necessity—and failure—of viewing access and accessibility from disability perspectives and anticipating a whole range of potential needs.

CONCLUSION

Considering the marginalisation of disability sexuality, a tendency to understand accessibility only through physical access as well as the dominant—often ableist—assumptions about disability intimacy, *Kerbs* is an important play that openly discusses these issues while presenting a humorous and enjoyable story. It creates a sense of intimacy by exploring the nuances and complexities of beginning a romantic relationship as a young disabled person. It also teaches by presenting alternative geographies of space and logistics of navigating movement within them. The play shows that access intimacy and disability intimacy demand care and attentiveness to others, while also being a source of pleasure and connection to the caregiver.

While its plot is based on the rather conventional formula of a romantic comedy, *Kerbs* can be productively read through the prism of crip/queer theory and contextualised in disability activism. In its exploration of marginalisation, exclusion, and relegation to alternative spaces—both physical and digital—*Kerbs* points to an important heritage of non-normative sexualities, defining disability intimacy as a sexual minority and pointing to the residue of crip/queer transgression in how it can be placed in contemporary sexual culture. This is most poignantly represented by the presentation of the accessible public toilet as one of the spatial and mechanical affordances readily used by the young lovers, which is also inscribed in an alternative space for other identities and sexualities. The assistance given by a lesbian friend further invites intersectional readings of relationality and solidarity. The other activist extension of the play—the anti-straw-ban protests—appears in the scene that shows the difference

[8] It is worth noting that a similar campaign took place in other countries, including the United Kingdom. There is a sizable coverage of protests and critical comments from people with disabilities publicly speaking against ableist solutions in environmental protection, emphasising the plastic straw's assistive function, e.g. Shona Louise, https://shonalouise.com/2018/11/19/the-plastic-straw-ban-how-it-harms/, Penny Pepper, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jul/09/disabled-person-plastic-straws-baby-wipes, Sarah Bell and Emma Geen, https://sensing-climate.com/news/reflecting-on-eco-ableism.

between the logistics of access and access intimacy. With the characters' explicit reference to the protests through the use of hashtags, the struggle for having their needs met resonates with political awareness and engagement.

Although the problem of disability sexuality has been addressed in a number of recent plays, such as *All of Us* by Francesca Martinez, *Reasons You Should(n't) Love Me* by Amy Trigg, *The Solid Life of Sugar Water* by Jack Thorne, or *The Almighty Sometimes* by Kendall Feaver, it needs to be emphasised once again that Michael Southan's *Kerbs* offers an interesting aesthetic solution based on access aesthetics. The play is structured in a way that its script already contains directions that make it (more) fully accessible. This is not only about stage directions pointing to such a need, but rather how the play already contains forms of communication that naturally interweave audiodescription with subtitling (text projections) as a prerequisite for access intimacy. Taking into consideration its authorship, directing (by Nickie Miles-Wildin), and fair casting strategies, *Kerbs* represents a high level of access aesthetics rooted in authentic disability experience, while offering an innovative theatrical form to its audiences.

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