

Crippling Visibility: Re-presenting Disabled Girls and Girlhoods

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In 2017 I was riding a bus down Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles to the Disability as Spectacle conference when I saw the image of a disabled girl on the back of a bus stop bench: a young, white girl with down syndrome, face painted like an American flag. She was part of the Ad Council's public service campaign, "Love Has No Labels."¹ I was on my way to the conference to present about disabled girl YouTubers, and I came to realize that the image I serendipitously encountered was part and parcel of the new representational politics of disabled girlhood that I was investigating. In the 2010s, the disabled girl curiously emerges across a range of different sites in the United States' mediascape: in HBO documentaries, on TikTok, and, curiously, on the back of bus stop benches. No longer represented solely through discourses of risk, pathologization, and vulnerability – taking drastically different forms than in Jerry Lewis Telethons – the disabled girls that come to hypervisibly materialize in our recent cultural imaginary are pageant queens, social media influencers, and disability rights activists.

Since the turn of the 21st century, the girl has appeared with ubiquity in media culture as a fabulous/scandalous object onto which we gaze and as a resource to work through anxieties wrought by neoliberalism and post-feminism (Gill 2007; Harris 2004; McRobbie 2009; Projansky 2014). The disabled girl, however, has rarely been theorized (Annamma 2018; Hill 2017, 2022; Mutua and Erevelles 2012; Stienstra 2015). Often, she is understood as outside of girlhood: cast as an ontological impossibility because of a contradiction between youngness and disability. This is because scholars' understandings are figured through the medical or individual model of disability, which posits disability as a pathologized condition, an individual deficit, and a self-evident truth inhered in the body. Within this paradigm, disability is understood as something that must be overcome, intervened upon, cured, or eliminated.

The multiplicity of emergent representations of disabled girls and girlhoods require us to consider the disabled girl with theoretical dexterity and urgency. These representations compel us to ask, why disabled girls, why now? Disabled people have recently come to symbolize a "certain kind of embodied value for contemporary nations," and "increasingly perform [...] representational work [...] as a symbol of expansive inclusionist efforts" (Mitchell and Snyder 15; 19). What does the representation of the young, white girl with down syndrome tell us about how disabled girlhood has come to be mobilized to tell a story about a post-Americans with Disabilities Act United States? In my work I argue we must *crip*² these representations, or interrogate and unsettle assumptions about disability, paying close attention to how cis-heteronormative discourses of ideal girlhood, normative affects,

and able-nationalist logics collide to facilitate the recognition and cultural valuation of certain disabled girl subjects more than others.

But, also, what happens when we turn toward disabled girls, paying close attention to how they re-present themselves? On social media—TikTok, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram—disabled girls actively *crip* girlhood, or upend what we think we know about disability and girlhood. They recast the meaning ascribed to disabled girl bodyminds on their own terms. More questions remain. What stories do disabled girls, themselves, have to tell? How do these stories differ from the story that the bus stop bench purported to tell?

Notes

¹ The “Love Has No Labels” campaign, although produced and distributed by the Ad Council, has several “official” and nonprofit partners. Among the official partners are Bank of America, Walmart, State Farm, and Prudential. The Human Rights Campaign, GLAAD, AARP, Story Corps, and the National Women’s Law Center are among the nonprofit partners.

² Crip is a term reclaimed and used by disability activists, cultural workers, and scholars (Clare 1999; Sandahl 2003; McRuer 2006; Kafer 2014). Crip has come to signify many things at once: an “in-your-face” and prideful reclamation of disability, a capacious and flexible term encompassing all sorts of non-normative embodiments, and, according to Eli Clare (1999), a “word to help forge a politics” (70). To crip or crippling, in the simplest of characterizations, is a practice that interrogates or unsettles assumptions about disability and disabled people.

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