4 A Future for Whom?

Passing on Billboard Liberation

[Advertising] is a world that works by abstraction, a potential place or state of being situated not in the present but in an imagined future with the promise to the consumer of things "you" will have, a lifestyle you can take part in.

—Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, "Consumer Culture and the Manufacturing of Desire"

"Super man," the billboard exclaims, the unfamiliar gap between the two words emphasizing both the noun and its adjective. Below this phrase is the word "STRENGTH," followed by the imperative "Pass It On." At the bottom, in small print, runs the name and web address of the organization behind this public relations campaign: Values.com/Foundation for a Better Life. The "super man" referenced in the caption is, of course, the late Christopher Reeve, the white actor who starred in a series of Superman films in the 1980s before becoming a quadriplegic in a riding accident in 1995. A black-and-white photograph of Reeve's head and shoulders consumes the left half of the billboard; the only marker of Reeve's disability is the ventilator tube that is just visible at the bottom of the frame. Reeve smiles slightly, looking thoughtfully into the camera and the eyes of passersby.

Quadriplegics are not often presented as the embodiment of strength, but this sign suggests that, in Reeve's case, such a designation is accurate. According to the billboard, although Reeve was no longer able to run or jump or climb, he remained a strong man; his strength simply lay more in his character than in his body. Prior to his injuries, Reeve was "Superman," a fictional hero capable of leaping buildings and bending steel. Later, as a disabled person, Reeve was not Superman but a super man. The billboard informs its audience that Reeve's masculinity not only remained intact postinjury but increased, an improvement due primarily to his strong character and integrity. Indeed, his masculinity, disability, and strength are presented in the billboard as intricately related, each supporting the other: it was his disability that provided him the opportunity to further his masculinity. Reeve's journey, working even after a quadriplegia, in turn marked him as a symbol of self-improvement, to a certain degree, of the values of the organization and its attempt to depoliticize. According to the Values organization, the Foundation, the FBL itself is made possible through references to a "better life" sketched in future articulations. Not all masculinity, especially those figures in the public eye, are used to render this "community values" label.

In order to show the billboard's possible through references to a "better life" in the public eye, I uncover an alternative, and my work is the text that turns this iconography into a critique.

Super Man's Values

Persuading passersby to engage in values-oriented campaigns, such as the Values.com/Foundation for a Better Life, the sponsoring nonprofit organization uses billboards, bus shelter posters, and newspaper ads.
provided him the opportunity to prove his strength, and his strength testified to his masculinity. Reeve’s ability to triumph over his disabilities, to continue living and working even after a life-changing injury, marked him as strong, and this strength in turn marked him as a super man. The billboard urges viewers to preach this message of self-improvement, to spread the word about the importance of developing and maintaining strength of character, even in, or especially in, the face of adversity.

According to the organization’s website, “The Foundation for a Better Life is not affiliated with any political groups or religious organizations” but is rather an apolitical organization interested in fostering individual and collective betterment through values education and engagement. It is this positioning that I want to examine here: this attempt to depoliticize notions of community, this assumption of shared values, and this articulation of what a better life entails. By presenting these concepts as apolitical, the Foundation for a Better Life (FBL) renders them natural, accepted, commonsense, and therefore beyond the scope of debate or discussion. The FBL operates on the assumption that we all know and agree what a better life entails, and what values are necessary to achieve it; there is no need for argument or critique. Representations of disability and illness play a large role in this campaign, with a significant number of billboards praising individuals with disabilities for having the strength of character to “overcome” their disabilities. The depoliticization mandated by these billboards and the FBL itself is made possible through reference to the disabled body; in other words, it is not just that the FBL depoliticizes disability, but that it does so in order to depoliticize all the values featured in its campaign. Indeed, the presence of the disabled body is used to render this campaign not as ideology but as common sense.

In order to show that the depoliticization mandated by these billboards is made possible through reference to the disabled body, I first examine the parameters of this “better life” sketched out by the FBL, highlighting the exclusions inherent in such articulations. Not all bodies, practices, or identities are welcome in this better life, especially those figures deemed too queer, or too political, or too dependent to be of value. Next, I uncover the ways in which these billboards strategically deploy this depoliticized view of disability to present their entire ideology as beyond reproach. Finally, I want to explore the possibility of queering and crippling these billboards, of offering alternative, and multiple, conceptions of what constitutes a better life. How might we turn this iconography back on itself, making apparent its political assumptions about “community values” by challenging its deployment of disability and disabled bodies?

Super Man’s Values and the Quest for a Better Life

Persuading passersby of the importance of self-improvement, and encouraging them to engage in values-oriented conversations, is the raison d’être of the Foundation for a Better Life, the sponsor of the Reeve billboard and others like it. A privately funded nonprofit organization based in Colorado, the FBL uses its website and a series of billboards, bus shelter posters, and television public service announcements to advocate
personal responsibility and character development. According to the website, the FBL's mission is to remind people of the importance of "quality values." In order to promote these values, each of the organization's print pieces celebrates a different value, from ambition to self-respect, by highlighting a person or event that embodies that trait. The celebrities and private citizens featured in the campaign donated their images to the FBL in support of its efforts to foster values-based communities and individuals. In addition to the Reeve piece on strength, there are billboards of a New York City firefighter on 9/11 (who modeled courage), Benjamin Franklin (displaying ingenuity), and even the animated figure Shrek (who encourages you to believe in yourself), among others. All three of the "courage" signs are illustrated with an adult male figure (a 9/11 firefighter, a protestor at Tiananmen Square, and Muhammad Ali), suggesting that the values of the FBL's community adhere, at least partly, to traditional gender roles. The values "helping others," "volunteering," "compassion," and "love," for example, are represented by women.

There are fifty-eight different billboards in the group's portfolio, almost a third of which feature disabled people who, as the captions make clear, have overcome the limitations of their minds and bodies through the development of individual values: Muhammad Ali, whose face is shown in a black-and-white photograph edged by darkness, embodies courage in recognizing that, as someone with Parkinson's disease, "His biggest fight yet isn't in the ring"; Adam Bender, who lost a leg to cancer, stands one-legged in his baseball uniform as a symbol of overcoming ("Threw cancer a curve ball"); Brooke Ellison, smiling as she poses in her wheelchair and wearing her graduation gown, was able to graduate from Harvard ("Quadriplegic. A-. Harvard") because of her determination; Michael J. Fox, depicted in black-and-white with his face partly in shadow, models optimism ("Determined to outfox Parkinson's"); Whoopi Goldberg, pictured with lowered head, furrowed brow, and her eyes looking up at the camera through her dreadlocks, "Overcame [sic] dyslexia" through hard work; Bethany Hamilton, a young surfer who lost an arm during a shark attack, demonstrates rising above adversity ("Me, quit? Never") as she poses on the beach next to her bitten surfboard; Dick Hoyt models devotion by pushing his adult son Rick in a modified racing wheelchair along a wooded path ("Dad's been behind him for 65 marathons"); Helen Keller, depicted as a young girl reading Braille and wearing an abundantly frilly dress, is praised for her foresight because she "could only see possibilities"; Christopher Reeve, as noted above, is a "Superman" because of his strength; Alexandra Scott, a young girl pictured sitting behind her homemade lemonade stand, is a figure of inspiration for raising millions of dollars for pediatric cancer research ("Raised $1M to fight cancer. Including hers"); Marlon Shirley, poised to begin a race with his sleek prosthetic leg, epitomizes overcoming ("Lost Leg. Not heart!"); and Eric Weihenmayer, a blind hiker photographed in profile on a snowy mountaintop, succeeded ("Climbed Everest. Blind") thanks to his vision.

In keeping with the foundation's focus on personal accountability, most of the people featured in these billboards are pictured alone, several of them depicted against
an empty dark background. The accompanying text makes clear that whatever successes these people have achieved, whether graduating from college or reaching Everest, were achieved solely through an individual adherence to “community-accepted values.” Within this individualist framework, disability is presented as something to be overcome through personal achievement and dedication. Although the Hoyt father-son team seemingly departs from this iconography of individualism, disability in this image remains firmly within a private familial framework; not only is a family member the only community imagined for Rick Hoyt, “devotion”—a virtue laden with notions of private faith and individual rather than social action—is presented as the operative value here. Moreover, despite their label “Team Hoyt,” the father is positioned as the virtuous one; he is the agent of devotion and his disabled son its passive recipient.

In case the message of the billboards is too ambiguous, the FBL’s website clearly delineates the group’s perspective: by encouraging “adherence to a set of quality values through personal accountability and by raising the level of expectations of performance of all individuals regardless of religion or race,” the FBL places a high premium on individual responsibility. The billboards are intended “to remind individuals they are accountable and empowered with the ability to take responsibility for their lives and to promote a set of values that sees them through their failures and capitalizes on their successes.”

This narrative of overcoming is made explicit in the texts featuring Adam Bender, Whoopi Goldberg, Bethany Hamilton, and Marlon Shirley, but it underlies the other signs as well: Eric Weihenmayer, for example, overcomes the limitations of his eyesight by relying on his metaphoric vision, an intangible virtue that permits him to achieve a difficult feat, while Brooke Ellison and Christopher Reeve overcome quadriplegia through their respective determination and strength? Disability appears as an individual physical problem that can best be overcome (and should be overcome) through strength of character and adherence to an established set of community values.

This focus on personal responsibility precludes any discussion of social, political, or collective responsibility. There are no billboards touting solidarity, or social change, or community development; none of the images celebrate disparate groups coming together to engage in coalition work. There is no recognition of ableism or discrimination or oppression in these materials, only an insistence that individuals take responsibility for their own successes and failures. As a result, disability is depoliticized, presented as a fact of life requiring determination and courage, not as a system marking some bodies, ways of thinking, and patterns of movement as deviant and unworthy.

This depoliticization is exacerbated by the campaign’s erasure of the work of disability rights activists. In the FBL worldview, disabled people thrive not because of civil rights laws and protection from discrimination, but because of their personal integrity, courage, and ability to overcome obstacles. Thus, Ellison’s ability to go to Harvard is attributed solely to her individual determination, which, although a factor in her success (and certainly a factor in her A- average), was surely facilitated by
accessible buildings, antidiscrimination policies, and laws mandating equitable and inclusive education for disabled people. Her education was, in key ways, made possible by the disability rights activists who struggled before, and after, her.

Disability rights activists, however, aren't the only ones erased in this particular billboard, and it is worth sitting with the Ellison image a little longer in order to highlight the gendered assumptions of this campaign. Brooke Ellison's mother, Jean, was surely as determined as her daughter when it came to Brooke's education. Jean Ellison lived with Brooke during her tenure at Harvard, attending classes with her, helping with her personal care, and serving as her scribe during exams: doing whatever it took, in other words, to help Brooke survive and flourish at Harvard. Ellison's profile on the FBL website does acknowledge that she excelled at Harvard "[w]ith the tireless help of her mother," but this help is made invisible by the billboard image and text. Unlike Dick Hoyt, who is publicly celebrated for the (alleged) sacrifices he has made to assist his son, and lifted up as the embodiment of devotion, Jean Ellison is nowhere to be found in the image of her daughter. Comparing the representations of these two parent-child teams, one could easily argue that gender plays a role here: we expect women, as mothers, to devote their lives to their children, an expectation that then renders their devotion banal and uninteresting; but male, fatherly, devotion continues to be treated as an anomaly and therefore deserving of surprised celebration.

The FBL's attention to individual virtue obscures the ableist attitudes inherent in these billboards. Reeve appears strong and "super" to many Americans, and Ali "courageous," simply by virtue of their living with a disability. In the logic of ableism, anyone who can handle such an (allegedly) horrible life must be strong; a lesser man would have given up in despair years ago. Indeed, Reeve's refusal to "give up" is precisely why the FBL selected Reeve for their model of strength; in the "billboard backstories" section of their website, they praise Reeve for trying to "beat paralysis and the spinal cord injuries" rather than "giv[ing] up." Asserting that Goldberg is successful because of her hard work suggests that other people with dyslexia and learning disabilities who have not met with similar success have simply failed to engage in hard work; unlike Whoopi Goldberg, they are apparently unwilling to devote themselves to success. Similarly, by positioning Welzenmayer's ascent of Everest as a matter of vision, the FBL implies that most blind people, who have not ascended Everest or accomplished equivalently astounding feats, are lacking not only eyesight but vision. The disabled people populating these billboards epitomize the paradoxical figure of the supercrip: supercrips are those disabled figures favored in the media, products of either extremely low expectations (disability by definition means incompetence, so anything a disabled person does, no matter how mundane or banal, merits exaggerated praise) or extremely high expectations (disabled people must accomplish incredibly difficult, and therefore inspiring, tasks to be worthy of nondisabled attention).

The individuals featured in these billboards have been decontextualized and their lives have been depoliticized. They have been removed from the realm of health-care
inequalities, inaccessible buildings, and discriminatory hiring practices. Those who have succeeded do not need legislative assistance because they have strong values; those who have failed simply lack those values and are in need not of a more equitable society but of character education. According to the FBL and its billboards, disability is not a political issue but a character issue, and should be addressed as such. There is no mention of the ways in which these individuals differ by race, gender, or class, presenting everyone as equally capable of succeeding, as possessing equal opportunities and resources. Reeve's many accomplishments, for example, are presented as solely the result of his immense inner strength of character; his reliance on a huge staff of attendants, therapists, and doctors—all made possible because of his personal wealth and quality insurance coverage—go unmentioned. All it takes is strength to survive, and thrive.

In this focus on individual virtue and personal responsibility, every other aspect of these individuals' lives is stripped away, making disability, and the overcoming of that disability, the only salient characteristic of their lives. Muhammad Ali's well-known battles with racism and his public protests against US imperialism in Vietnam—surely instances in which he embodied courage by speaking his conscience and challenging injustice—are erased in the presentation of Parkinson's disease as his biggest fight yet, or as his only fight outside of the ring.1 To address those fights, the FBL would have to expand its vision of a better life to include not simply individual virtues but collective action. It would necessitate a contextualizing of disability as only a part of the fabric of people's lives, one always already inflected by categories of race, class, and gender. Such a portrayal would then require a reckoning with the politics of disability, thereby challenging the FBL's positioning of disability as mere fact of the mind/body, a presentation that enables their depiction of the entire Pass It On campaign as apolitical, noncontroversial, and commonsense. In other words, the campaign relies heavily on a depoliticized vision of disability in order to depoliticize the entire campaign.

A Better Life for Whom? Foundational Foreclosures

According to the FBL's website, the group is concerned about the current state of American culture and the direction in which the country is moving. It offers these billboards as part of its vision for what a better America would look like and what values it would embody. The very name of the organization—the Foundation for a Better Life—establishes the group's concern with the future and testifies to its belief that the principles it celebrates are integral to achieving this "better life." In an early version of the FAQ section of its website, the organization argues that the future depends on individual Americans dedicating themselves to "community values" and values-based education:

The Foundation encourages others to step up to a higher level and then to pass on those positive values they have learned. These seemingly small examples of
individuals living values-based lives may not change the world, but collectively they will make a difference. And in the process help make the world a better place for everyone. After all, developing values and passing them on to others is the Foundation for a Better Life.9

The FBL mission statement claims that the organization's sole purpose is to remind people of the importance of the "quality values" that "make a difference in our communities." In recent years, the website has become increasingly interactive, and there is now a section where visitors can suggest people and values for future billboards. At first glance, this shift seems to signal a new openness on the part of the organization, a willingness to see the values we live by as subject to debate and disagreement, but the FBL continues to define the terms of the debate. Commentators must choose from a select list of values in making their recommendations: "perseverance" is an acceptable virtue, for example, while "resistance" is not; values-based communities apparently have room for "volunteering" but not "activism." Moreover, every posting on the site is subject to the organization's terms and conditions, and there is not a single negative or critical post on the FBL site. A values-based life may be key to the health of the community, but it is the FBL, not local communities, that determines what those values are. Nor, for that matter, is there any discussion of what "community" means in this context and whom the term was intended to include. Nonetheless, the Pass It On campaign has been running on billboards, on television stations, and in movie theaters nationwide for over a decade, suggesting that the FBL envisions a coherent national community with a single set of shared values. But what are these community values? Who constitutes the community imagined here, and based on what criteria? Whose better life is this?

Wholly absent from the website are details about the FBL itself: there is no address given for the organization, nor is there a description of its history or a directory of its members. According to Gary Dixon, identified in press releases as the president of the FBL, the family who created and funded the FBL wants to remain anonymous, but media reports and tax returns link the organization to billionaire developer Philip Anschutz and the Anschutz Family Foundation.10 Since its inception in 1982, the Anschutz Foundation has supported a range of conservative organizations. In the early 1990s, it supported the antigay organization Colorado for Family Values, which was one of the driving forces behind Colorado's Amendment 2; declared unconstitutional by the US Supreme Court in 1996, this amendment to the state constitution would have prohibited local antidiscrimination laws on behalf of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. More recently, the Anschutz Foundation has provided financial support to the Institute for American Values, which runs antipornography campaigns, warns of the dangers of single-mother households, supports reforms to make divorces more difficult to acquire, and favors marriage incentives for low-income people. If these affiliations provide a hint of what the "better life" promised by the FBL entails, then the future they envision is certainly a heteronormative one.
Although individuals with disabilities play a starring role in the Pass It On campaign, they are not the primary or intended audience for these billboards. They appear in these billboards to inspire—and contain—the nondisabled, who are the target audience for these spots. "If even severely disabled people like Christopher Reeve and Brooke Ellison can develop these values and improve themselves," the signs imply, "then so can you. Unlike them, you have no excuse. Stop complaining, buck up, work hard and overcome."

Visitors to the FBL website can post comments on each billboard, and even a cursory reading of the posts makes clear that (nondisabled) viewers respond in exactly this way to these images. As one respondent wrote regarding the Bethany Hamilton sign, "[She] is a inspiration. For all those who blame others or circumstances, I will say—'look at Bethany Hamilton.'" R. H. in Utah internalizes this message, writing in response to the Reeve billboard: "I printed this out/cut it out and thumbtacked it to my pod wall at work. I see it everyday and I am reminded that I am not paralyzed and I can do this!... My life isn’t so hard—just somedays it feels like it is." Many of the comments regarding the disability billboards echo this notion that (nondisabled) viewers should be grateful for what they have because things could be much worse, a "much worse" best illustrated by the disabled body."

The billboard format exacerbates this contrast. Each of these images is located far above ground level, so that passersby literally have to look up at the pictures of the virtuous people towering over them. This difference in scale mimics the difference in scale nondisabled viewers trace between themselves and the disabled people in the billboards: "Their problems are huge—paralysis, blindness, amputation—and mine are small because I’m not disabled."

Through these messages of individualism and compliance, the disabled bodies in these billboards are used to push other disabled bodies aside, beyond the margins of these texts. Populating the margins of the FBL billboards are those other disabled people, the ones who haven’t managed to graduate from Harvard, or climb Mount Everest, or sport high-tech prosthetic limbs. The ones who demand and require access to quality elementary education, or who protest the institutionalization of mostly low-income disabled people, or who refuse to accept quietly the cultural narratives of cure and assimilation. The ones who aren’t interested in easy celebrations of community values but rather in the right to live within one’s community, on one’s own terms. The ones who recognize that the marginalization of disabled people is due not to a lack of determination or hard work or courage but to pervasive and persistent economic, political, and social exclusions. These disabled bodies are relegated to the margins of the better futures promised by the FBL: we’re admitted only insofar as we promise not to complain but only to inspire.

This articulation of a better life, illustrated through the strategic use of disabled bodies, conjures not only an able-bodied future, but a heteronormative one. Joining the failed disabled bodies on the margins of these billboards are the failed bodies of
queers and other deviants. If the possession of already-agreed-upon and extrapolitical values are necessary for inclusion in the FBL dreamscape, then queers will be excluded by default. If, as David Halperin argues, queerness entails "a social space for the construction of different identities, for the elaboration of various types of relationships, for the development of new cultural forms," then queerness cannot—and would not—coexist with the FBL. Rather than simply accepting such values as self-evident, queer theory would insist upon an interrogation of such values. Whose values are these, and whose experiences do they take for granted?

Although the FBL presents itself as committed to and concerned about diversity and tolerance of difference—two values highlighted on the organization’s website—it is a diversity that is used to consolidate a white able-bodied heteronormativity. Images on the FBL website are carefully composed of people of all ages, religious affiliations, and racial/ethnic groups, but the insistence on shared community values constrains and contains that diversity. There is no recognition that different communities might value different characteristics at different historical moments and in different contexts. On the contrary, the FBL argues that its values, and its entire campaign, "transcend any particular religion or nationality," evoking a unified global community coming together to lead values-based lives. The FBL’s "better life" and "positive values" rhetoric takes for granted the notion that "we" all agree what constitutes a better life, what values we hold dear, and, for that matter, who "we" are.

This taken-for-grantedness is made possible, at least in part, through strategic recourse to the disabled body. While the few FBL billboards that draw explicitly on 9/11 or make direct calls to patriotism have met with some criticism, the remainder of the billboards, and particularly those in what I call the disability series, serve to shield the entire FBL campaign from scrutiny. Images of inspirational cripples, from Reeve to Ellison, are used to testify to a shared set of values with which we can all easily agree. Who would publicly dispute the description of Mohammad Ali as courageous, or Alexandra Scott as inspirational, or Brooke Ellison as the embodiment of determination? Who would deny the value of perseverance, or inner strength, or foresight, particularly when embodied by people from a marginalized group? As one of my students said when I mentioned this campaign to her, "What kind of person says bad things about a billboard praising a little girl with cancer?"

Indeed, I can find little public criticism of the billboards, the "Pass It On" campaign, or the FBL itself. A LexisNexis search turns up a few exposés on Philip Anschutz (his business deals, particularly his ownership of Qwest Communications, have sparked a handful of lawsuits), but nothing critical about the billboards themselves. Even in the context of an extended profile of Anschutz, the New York Times, for example, argues that these billboards are "largely noncontroversial, apolitical, and multifaith," ending the discussion there. Anschutz, in other words, merits critical attention by the press, but the billboards apparently do not. There is no need for a critical look at these billboards because there is nothing there, no agenda, no politics, no exclusions. In the
words of the FBL, “In this day and age, it can be hard to believe that an organization’s only goal is to encourage others to do good—but that really is why we exist.”

If this lack of critical attention is any indication, the FBL is being taken at their word, understood as existing only to foster good works and character development. But the predominance of disabled bodies in these billboards demands greater attention. What work does disability do in this campaign, and what are the assumptions on which these signs rely?

In order to address these questions, I want to deconstruct two more billboards, one that clearly belongs in the disability series of images, and one that, at least on the surface, seems not to be about disability at all. I first saw the Marlon Shirley billboard in 2006, three years into the US occupation of Iraq. Shirley’s amputation is not war-related; as his FBL backstory makes clear, his left foot was amputated in 1984 as the result of a childhood accident. The billboard itself, however, doesn’t give any details of Shirley’s injury, and it seems likely that at least some viewers will imagine this young black male amputee as one of the 45,329 US service members injured in Iraq and Afghanistan. Shirley’s age, gender, and race, together with his athleticism, feed into this misperception of him as an injured veteran; young men continue to be the image of the US military, news profiles of disabled athletes tend to focus on disabled veterans, and Shirley’s youthful masculinity suggest his amputation was the result of accident rather than illness. Moreover, the nature of Shirley’s impairment increases the likelihood that he will be read as an injured veteran. Although an astonishing number of veterans are returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with traumatic brain injuries and/or PTSD, the figure of the amputee remains the predominant image of the disabled veteran in the media.

What are we to make of the fact that this image surfaced in this particular moment, as many wounded soldiers were returning home and attempting to claim disability assistance and health care? Or at a time when soldiers with PTSD were being denied treatment and discharged because they allegedly had preexisting conditions? What might “overcoming” mean in such a context? Or a focus on personal responsibility and individual character development? To be clear: I’m not suggesting that the Pentagon is behind the FBL, determining which images appear when; nor do I mean to suggest that the FBL is opposed to granting any medical care or social services to disabled veterans. But I do want to draw attention to the ideological frameworks and effects of these billboards. Given the other billboards in this campaign, and the responses viewers have had to such billboards, it seems reasonable to assume that many viewers will read Shirley’s body and the accompanying text (Lost leg, not heart / OVERCOMING / Pass It On) as a reminder that all people, including wounded veterans, need to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. The sign’s imperative to overcome, and then to pass on such overcoming to others, makes clear that such personal achievement is the only acceptable response to tragedy; only then will we have the foundation for a better life.
To make clear how much the effectiveness of this message relies on the disabled body, I turn now to a billboard that doesn't appear to have anything to do with disability. In this billboard, Liz Murray, a young white woman, is seated in a classroom, holding a psychology textbook and smiling slightly at the camera. "From homeless to Harvard," the billboard proclaims, "AMBITION." I first saw this billboard in Austin, Texas, in the northern part of the city. The sign was directly over a clothes donation box and a bus shelter—two sites marked by poverty and homelessness—at an intersection with panhandlers on each corner. Looking up at the sign and down at the donation box, the insidiousness of this campaign hit me hard. How might the sight of this billboard affect drivers' responses to the panhandlers at the stoplight? Or how might it affect their responses to the city of Austin's changes to its panhandling laws, changes intended to push the homeless away from city streets and neighborhoods? More broadly, how might it influence their stance toward the public sector itself, and moves to further shrink public services? Does a values-based life mean that we should preach ambition to the homeless? Is ambition all that the homeless lack? Surely Murray's journey to Harvard was more complicated than that, but the juxtaposition of her smiling face and the donation box suggests otherwise.

Although this particular billboard does not seem at first to fit in my disability series, I want to position it as such. Not only are many homeless people disabled, homelessness is a threat all-too-real for many disabled people; homelessness is a disability issue. But even Murray's own "billboard backstory" draws a link with disability. Her parents were both drug addicts when she was a child, and it was their addiction that caused them to lose their housing. Her mother eventually died of AIDS, and Murray nursed her father through a long illness. These details emerge in reading her story on the FBL website, as do examples of the many kinds of assistance she received in her childhood. The sound-bite format of the billboard eclipses these details, however, completely removing her story from any social or political context.

Responses to the billboard suggest that this removal of context has been effective. Rafael, in Salinas, California, writes on the FBL website: "Thank you for this wonderful billboard and its prime location. I saw this billboard driving along highway 99 in California's Central Valley where unemployment and poverty is at double digits. Ambition lets us all know that everything is possible if you go after it." But can ambition really solve the problem of unemployment? How is Murray's story being used to push other bodies—disabled and nondisabled—out of the margins of the billboards, those who haven't managed to ride the wave of personal responsibility to success? Personal responsibility becomes the only factor that matters, the only thing standing between the homeless and a Harvard education.

What I want to suggest is that the predominance of disability billboards in the FBL campaign makes it easier for most people to read this kind of decontextualized paean to personal responsibility as apolitical and benign. Queer theorists Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman suggest that the figure of the child is used to render certain positions as
extrapolitical, as beyond the realm of politics, and I suggest that the disabled body performs a similar function within the logic of the FBL. To quote Edelman,

Such “self-evident” one-sidedness—the affirmation of a value so unquestioned, because so obviously unquestionable, as that of the Child whose innocence solicits our defense—is precisely, of course, what distinguishes public service announcements from the partisan discourse of political argumentation. But it is also, I suggest, what makes such announcements so oppressively political... shap[ing] the logic within which the political can be thought.9

In the case of the FBL, the “unquestioned because so obviously unquestionable” position is that of praising disabled people for overcoming their disabilities. What could possibly be wrong with highlighting the character of people who have worked hard and succeeded?

This question runs throughout online discussions of the billboard campaign. Anytime someone challenges the neoliberal demands of the billboards, there are readers who respond with calls for more trust and less cynicism. As one commentator puts it, “Take the message you are given and stop trying to decipher hidden intentions. [I]t’ll do you a lot of good.”9 Even some of those who are suspicious of Philip Anschutz’s involvement with the FBL (and who therefore worry that there might be “hidden intentions”) make distinctions between Anschutz’s politics and the values he promotes. Maria Niles of BlogHer, for example, is wary of Anschutz’s involvement, casting her politics as far different from his, but admits to liking and appreciating the uplifting messages of the billboards.9 Justin Berrier, writing on the MediaMatters blog, stresses that he has “no problem with the Foundation for a Better Life’s values messages” even as he condemns the secrecy surrounding Anschutz’s involvement with the organization.9 Respondents to a critical story on Portland’s Indymedia site react similarly, with one explaining that his “concerns are hardly the message, but clearly the messenger”; another notes that, “while the info on Anschutz is disturbing to me, and I don’t like the Unity/Spirit of America stuff, I thought the other messages passed along were good.”9

There are bloggers challenging the FBL billboards, and some of them challenge the campaign for its exclusionary notions of community, much as I do here. But their critiques are almost always leveled at the explicitly, or recognizably, political billboards, those that make explicit reference to patriotism and nationalism. The disability billboards are given a pass, either not discussed at all or critiqued only for their “saccharine” or “cheesy” tone. Yet, as I detail here, the disability series is also political, and those images play a significant role in creating the exclusionary, and coercive, notions of community that pervade the campaign as a whole. We need to recognize and challenge this strategic deployment of disability, acknowledging that rhetorics of disability acceptance and inclusion can be used to decidedly un-crip ends.93

Advertising, including public service announcements, works by “reflect[ing] preexisting ideological narratives,” and the FBL billboards are successful because
they draw on commonsense, familiar understandings of disability.24 The use of realistic photographs facilitates the reception of these billboards as truth. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explains, "Photography's immediacy and claim to truth intensify what it tells viewers about disability, at once shaping and registering the public perception of disability."25 Seeing disability as the site of and for personal struggle, overcoming, and triumph—one of the dominant frames for understanding disability in this culture—makes it easier to overlook the ideological underpinnings of this campaign.

As these responses suggest, most of the FBL billboards—and by extension, the entire Pass It On campaign—are seen to be not about politics but about hope and community and goodness. And it is the presence of disabled minds/bodies that makes this message possible, not because disabled minds/bodies are recognized as embodying hope, community, or goodness, but because we assume that anyone who finds Christopher Reeve inspiring or wants to say kind things about Marlon Shirley must embody these characteristics. These ads are effectively cast as beyond reproach because what oppositional stance could one possibly take to these texts? There is no need to explore whose values are celebrated in this campaign, whose bodies are seen as belonging to the community, whose practices are valued. As a result, those failed disabled bodies inhabiting the margins of the billboards remain on the margins, as do the bodies of others unable to meet the FBL's standard of virtue, unwelcome in the FBL community.

But "community" rests on the notion that people can come together in consensus and unity, putting aside their differences in order to create a unified whole grounded in common experiences and common values. This presumption of unity, however, excludes differences and dissent, thereby creating a self-perpetuating homogeneity.26 Attempts to determine in advance how to adjudicate community values run the risk of solidifying existing understandings of community, thereby making it much more difficult to shift or expand definitions of "community" in the future. Current understandings of such concepts then become the standard against which to measure future articulations, potentially keeping in place barriers to access that are not as yet recognized as such, thereby prohibiting or marginalizing other bodies, identities, and practices. Instead, following Judith Butler, I propose "open[ing] up the field of possibility . . . without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized."27

Queercrip Futures

There is another billboard in the Foundation for a Better Life's disability series that I have yet to address. Their final disability-related sign features a young baseball player dressed in his team uniform and holding a baseball bat. He sits proudly in his wheelchair, and his fellow wheelchair-baseball teammates are in a semicircle behind him, with a few nondisabled spectators standing in the borders of the photo. The word OPPORTUNITY appears on the right side of the billboard, over the phrase "A league
of their own.” According to the text, these young baseball players are flourishing thanks to their being given the opportunity to play in a "league of their own."

Drawing on the tools of feminist, queer, and disability studies scholars, I want to read this billboard differently, to crip and queer its representations. My oppositional reading begins by contrasting the picture in this billboard with the others in the disability series. This piece touting “opportunity” is the only one in which a disabled person is situated in a community, surrounded by other disabled people and their friends and family. Unlike Ali, Scott, Reeve, Keller, Goldberg, Ellison, Hamilton, Shirley, Fox, Bender, and Weihenmayer, all of whom are depicted alone, or Hoyt, who is featured with his “devoted” father, the baseball player is presented as part of a much larger community, one in which he is an active participant. He has gained recognition not for an individual achievement but for teamwork and collective action. Such a depiction seems appropriate, as this billboard is the only one to tout a value that hints at a larger social and political context. Unlike courage, determination, and hard work, each of which typically describes the character of an individual person, opportunity positions someone within a larger field of social relations. This sign, then, can be interpreted as a recognition that disabled people (like nondisabled people) need opportunities and resources in order to thrive. Rather than preaching a message of charity or individual accountability, this sign can be interpreted as a call for increased social responsibility, for working to ensure that all people have access to opportunity.

But this kind of reading requires working hard against the grain, and, as feminist and queer scholars have long noted, such readings can be far from satisfying. For, even as I describe my imagined interpretation, I know that most viewers read this image through a heavily sentimental lens. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues that images of disabled children epitomize the sentimentalization of disability, a process by which disability appears as “a problem to solve, an obstacle to eliminate, a challenge to meet,” thereby motivating the viewer to act on behalf of the “sympathetic, helpless child.” Within such a framework, it makes sense that the billboard backstory for this image includes quotes only from the parents of these children, not from the children themselves. We learn that the boy in the center of the frame is Justin, and that he has cerebral palsy, but we learn these facts only through the words of Justin’s (unidentified) parent. Justin’s visible presence in the billboard but verbal absence in the backstory suggests yet again that it is the nondisabled whom the FBL most wants to reach. Rather than read this billboard as a story about increased social responsibility, or about the vibrant communities that exist among and with disabled people, viewers are to discover yet another panem to personal virtues such as charity and tolerance. “Opportunity” reads not as part of a collective responsibility, as something tightly woven in structures of privilege and oppression, but as a personal obligation to those imagined as less fortunate than oneself, a private gift completely divorced from ableism, discrimination, or inequality.

Instead of resigning myself to the existing images, then, I want to imagine another disability series, another set of billboards that trumpet “a better life.” My disability
series imagines "community values" not in the FBL understanding, in which discrete individuals manifest a set of already-agreed-upon values in their own private lives, but in a feminist/queer/crip understanding of community and coalition values, in which both the parameters of the community and the values praised within it are open to debate. What does "courage," "determination," or "opportunity" mean? What kinds of practices and attitudes do they include, and which do they exclude? Who is involved in determining the characteristics valued in a particular community? Who is included in—or excluded from—the community itself? How can different communities come together to form coalitions? Rather than accepting the FBL proclamation that unity is "what makes us great," I envision a media campaign that favors dissent at least as much as unity, that recognizes political protest and activism as signs of courage, that is as concerned with collective responsibility and accountability as personal.

I am not the first to suggest alternate billboards to the ones created by the FBL. Billboard activists across the country have "liberated" some of these signs, with the "What makes us great/UNITY" billboard attracting the most attention. In the FBL version of this billboard, a young white girl waves an American flag while sitting on the shoulders of an adult male, perhaps her father. There are other people and flags in the background, suggesting a patriotic rally of some kind; the "billboard backstory" confirms this characterization, describing it as a rally in Arizona on September 12, 2001. In the reimagined versions, posted on Indymedia, one has been changed to read "What makes us great/IMPUNITY," while another states that "what makes us great" is "PROFITS AT ANY COST." Such efforts literally and metaphorically disrupt the borders of the billboard, making the billboard itself into a contested and contestable site, positioning the message contained therein as part of a larger debate. The "us" invoked in the billboard is apparently not so unified after all.

As far as I know, however, these activists have yet to liberate the billboards in the disability series, and this fact supports my contention that the presence of disability positions these billboards—and, effectively, the overall Pass It On campaign—as beyond reproach. Unlike the UNITY billboard, which has consistently been claimed as a political space and statement, the disability billboards are assumed to be devoid of any political content, and therefore not in need of debate or dialogue. The combination of words such as "determination," "inspiration," and "courage" with the images of disabled people creates an appeal seen as impossible to refuse. And this lack of debate is precisely my point: through the use of the disabled body, and the long history of representations of disability as natural, individual, and apolitical, the FBL casts its entire campaign as impossible to refuse.

In the face of this denial of politics, my extended disability series features Leroy Moore, a disabled African American poet and activist whose courage is evident in his writings condemning racism, ableism, and their interrelationships; Corbett O'Toole, a white lesbian polio survivor who models coalition building as she bridges queer, lesbian, and disability communities and concerns in her activism; disability rights
activists from ADAPT crawling up the steps of the Supreme Court building who illustrate the vital importance of dissent; the coalition of genderqueer and disability activists involved in PISSAR—People In Search of Safe and Accessible Restrooms—who embody direct action when they map gender-neutral and disability-accessible restrooms on college campuses; and Mia Mingus, a disabled queer woman of color practicing solidarity in her work on reproductive justice. And, in order to challenge the realm of “positive thinking” mandated by the FBL billboards—its kind of ableness—I also imagine billboards acknowledging anger over discriminatory policies and billboards mourning the loss of community activists. Disability in these images is not something to be overcome through adherence to “community values” but an identity to be claimed and reinterpreted through collective action and coalition work. In this worldview, disabled people do not lack strength of character but legal protections, access to public spaces, adequate and affordable health care, and social and political recognition.

I call for a queer/crip team of billboard liberators, scrawling the word “pity” or “tokenism” underneath the word “overcoming” on the Marlon Shirley billboard. I want to pair “inspiration”—a word that has long been the bane of disabled people’s existence—with Nomy Lamm’s description of a prosthetic leg as an effective, and certainly inspired, sex toy. I want to see Corinne’s famous photograph of two naked dykes getting it on in a wheelchair plastered over the picture of Bethany Hamilton: “Me, quit? Never.” Or let’s replace Helen Keller as the model of “only see[ing] possibilities” with Loree Erickson, a young activist pioneering the development of radical crip porn through her film Want. Not only would these text/image combinations trouble the staid, assimilationist images of disabled people favored by the FBL, they would also insist upon queer sexuality as valued.

After delivering an earlier version of this chapter at a talk in Berkeley, I joined two local crips in a small guerrilla campaign to kickstart these dialogues. We departed from the more established practice of billboard liberation and decided to liberate a bus shelter sign. With two of us in wheelchairs, and the third disabled by chronic fatigue syndrome and environmental illness (EI), the ground-level sign was easier to reach from our particular embodiments than a billboard would be. Moreover, the bus shelter seemed closer to crip communities and histories of crip activism than the billboard; public transit systems have long been targets of civil disobedience, with activists engaging in continuing struggles for accessible buses, bus and train stops, and stations. We found a bus shelter in southwest Berkeley that featured the Marlon Shirley image, and, armed with spray paint and stencils, we began the liberation. Although we had not discussed it in advance, we each took on the task best suited to our impairments: Ellen Samuels served as lookout, because her EI required her to stay at a distance from the paint; my limited hand control made wielding the spray paint impossible, so I held the stencils in place, blocking the sign from public view with my body; and Anne Finger transformed the original caption “Lost Leg, Not Heart: Overcoming” into “Lost Leg,
Not Rights: Overcoming Pity." Ellen snapped a quick picture of the liberated sign with her phone, and we hurried away.

In hindsight, our careful surreptitiousness was probably unnecessary. The depoliticization of disability that I trace in this chapter likely made our political acts unintelligible; no one would suspect three white women, two of them in wheelchairs, of vandalism or destruction of property. Indeed, as we moved away from the sign, we noticed two women waiting on the other side of the shelter, neither one of whom seemed to even notice what we were doing, despite our immediate proximity and excited conversation about our intent and action. Unfortunately, our liberating text was removed within days, and not long after that the FBL poster was replaced with an advertisement for America's Next Top Model, a different manifestation of heteronormative able-bodiedness.

I want to close with one more tweaked billboard to drive home the point that simply substituting the FBL billboards with my own, tempting though that may be, is not a permanent solution, as the America's Top Model ad suggests, nor is it an unambiguous one. In this final billboard, courtesy of the Billboard Liberation Front, we have the familiar image of the young white girl waving an American flag, but the text has been radically altered. NATIONALISM, the reworked ad now exclaims, "What Makes Us Blind." The billboard liberators have managed to highlight and challenge the nationalism inherent in the original advertisements, but only by relying on the same kind of normalizing logic found within the campaign as a whole. By figuring "blindness" as the sign of ignorance and exclusion, the alleged liberators of this billboard remained trapped in the ablest logic of the FBL. This time, rather than using disability to foreclose debate, the text's creators have used disability as a sign of such foreclosure. Either way, the better life heralded by the billboard isn't welcoming of disabled people.

Taking my cue from the work of queer cultural critics who remind us that "queer" is not always transgressive, I want us to reckon with the inevitability that in dealing with notions of a better life, of a better future, it is not enough to simply insert new billboards in the place of old ones; that, too, would signal a foreclosure of other potentials and possibilities. I am not merely arguing for a progress narrative of images, moving from "bad" images of disability to "good" ones. I offer these crippled, queered billboards not as the real tools of a better life, not as the real future, but as a catalyst to get us thinking about what might equal a more livable life, and for whom, under what conditions and at what costs.

Chapter 4


3. The image of the Tiananmen Square protester has been removed from the organization's website, and I am unsure as to when it disappeared. It was still on the site in 2007, but by 2010 it was gone, and there is no mention of it on the organization's website.

4. Of course, as any disability studies scholar (or social services gatekeeper) will note, determining who is and who is not disabled is easier said than done. For the purposes of this discussion, I have focused only on those figures who are widely recognized as disabled, who have publicly identified as disabled, and/or whose illnesses and disabilities are highlighted in the campaign itself.

5. The italicized words are the values highlighted in each billboard; on the billboard, the value is in white bold capitals, inside a red text box. The phrases in quotation marks are the captions on the billboards.


7. Amy Vidali offers a useful analysis of the relationship between vision and knowledge, critically examining the assumption that "knowing is seeing." Vidali, "Seeing What We Know: Disability and Theories of Metaphor," Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies 4, no. 1 (2010): 33–54. See also Georgina Kleege, Sight Unseen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999). Both the FBL billboards ("VISION") and the stylistic conventions of footnotes (e.g., "see Kleege") rely on this history of representation and this epistemology.

8. It is useful here to read the FBL's reevaluation of Muhammad Ali in light of Anna Mollow's discussion of overcoming. Mollow rightly notes that a story of overcoming illness or disability does not have to be "a denial of political realities" but can instead be "an assertion of personal strength amid overwhelming social oppression." In the case of the FBL, however, their overcoming narratives do not highlight "individuals' power in relation to oppressive political and economic structures." Mollow's criteria for understanding overcoming narratives differently—but rather deny that such oppression exists at all. Anna Mollow, "When Black Women Start Going on Prozac: Race, Gender, and Mental Illness in Meri Nana-Ana Danquah's Willow Weep for Me," MELUS 31, no. 3 (2006): 69, 81.


11. These kinds of responses likely feel familiar to many of us with visible disabilities. I have more than once been stopped by a stranger who wanted to tell me that seeing me made their day. As one woman put it, “I was feeling so sorry for myself today, but then I saw you and realized how lucky I am.”


13. There has been some attention to the campaign in the blogosphere, and I address those responses below. Thus far scholars have largely ignored the billboards, and most news coverage has been positive.


15. The billboards are not dated on the FBL website, making it difficult to determine when each billboard debuted nationwide. The Shirley billboard was not one of the original images.

16. The Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America organization (IAVA) includes official casualty statistics from the Department of Defense on its website, but it also encourages visitors to research the statistics provided by private organizations and individual researchers. Available at http://iava.org, accessed August 10, 2011. For additional statistics, see, for example, the website http://icasualties.org, accessed August 10, 2011.

17. For example, *Newsweek’s* editors chose an image of an amputee to illustrate their cover story, “Failing Our Wounded,” March 5, 2007, on newly disabled veterans and their troubles with Veterans Affairs.


20. Niles eventually decides that the ads make her too uncomfortable, but that discomfort seems to stem from her distrust of Amschutz rather than the content or rhetoric of the billboards themselves. Maria Niles, “Am I Too Cynical for a Better Life?” *BlogHer*, June 7, 2008, http://www.blogher.com/am-i-too-cynical-better-life.


23. Robert McRuer offers necessary caution about disability rhetorics and frameworks, noting that they can and are being used in ways counter to radical cripple politics. See, for example, Robert McRuer, “Taking It to the Bank: Independence and Inclusion on the World Market,” *Journal of Literary Disability* 1, no. 2 (2007): 5–14.


28. Susan Stewart, of the Kiss and Tell Collective, notes, “Some of us have been reading across the grain for so long that our eyes have splinters.” Kiss and Tell, *Her Tongue on my Theory* (Vancouver: Press Gang, 1994), 51.


36. As Robert McRuer shows in his analysis of disability imagery, it is not enough to frame some images of disability as “positive” and others as “negative.” McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 171–98.

Chapter 5
