In 2014, CoorDown, the Italian Coordinator of the National Association of People with Down syndrome, released a video entitled Dear Future Mom to promote the March 21 World Down Syndrome Day. The theme for World Down Syndrome Day in 2014 was the right to happiness and wellbeing for people with Down syndrome. As clearly stated at the beginning of Dear Future Mom, the video is also a response to a letter from a “scared” “future mom” of a baby who “has Down syndrome” who asks, “what kind of life will by child have?” Simultaneously employing a sentimental, realistic, and wondrous visual rhetoric (Garland Thomson, 2002), the video shows cute, positive, and happy white, middle-class intellectually disabled children and young adults in public spaces, such as a school, a park, and streets, and more intimate, yet still ordinary places, like a kitchen, a bedroom, a living room, and an office, responding to and calming the future mom’s fears in a range of European languages. The video plays an instrumental soothing and inspirational song that is combined with the multiple smiles of the intellectually disabled children and young adults, and the various showings of affection, such as hugs between them and their mothers. This video not only touches the viewer’s feelings (especially if the viewer is also an expectant mother of a disabled child, hence making her empathize with the scared future mom), but also has the potential to make the viewer cry. Indeed, by depicting the
intellectually disabled children and young adults in the video as happy, and by not emphasizing any other trait, the video makes them seem familiar. This identification is further reinforced when the intellectually disabled children and young adults tell the scared future mom, “don’t be afraid, your child will be able to do many things,” things that the non-intellectually disabled viewer can relate to, such as hugging, running, speaking, loving, going to school, writing, traveling without one’s parents, working and earning money, and renting an apartment and living alone. After convincing the scared future mom that her intellectually disabled child will be “like everybody,” and ensuring her that, even though “sometimes it will be difficult, very difficult, almost impossible [to live as an intellectually disabled person and achieve happiness],” “[her] child can be happy,” the video concludes with a message to the non-intellectually disabled viewer: “People with Down syndrome can live a happy life. Together we can make it possible. Everyone has the right to be happy” (emphasis added).

Acknowledging that, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2002) maintains, “the history of disabled people in the Western world is in part the history of being on display, of being visually conspicuous while politically and socially erased,” (p.56) and that, as McGuire (2012), informed by Titchkosky (2007), maintains, “texts [are] social actions that make up the meaning of people” (p. 63), I move now to cautiously examine the ways in which Dear Future Mom conceptualizes and (de)values intellectual disability, the material and emotional effects of such conceptualizations on the lives of intellectually disabled people, and the (im)possibilities for new ways of being and becoming in, with, and alongside difference that result from such understandings of intellectual disability. In this way, recognizing that, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2002) argues, almost all of the visual rhetorics of disability “appropriate the disabled body for the purposes of constructing, instructing or assuring some aspect of a putatively non-disabled viewer” (p.59), I question the video’s seemingly realistic rhetoric
that appears to be valuing intellectual disability and advocating for equality and the full inclusion of intellectually disabled children and young adults. Indeed, paying close attention to the nature of the set of practices that the intellectually disabled children and young adults in the video use as evidence to erase the future mom’s fear of Down syndrome and to convince her that “people with Down syndrome can live a happy life,” as well as to the fact that the video only shows white and middle-class intellectually disabled children and young adults, reveals that Dear Future Mom does not really value difference. In effect, these aspects demand us to ask, How does the video conceptualize “a happy life”? Happiness in/for what? What are the costs of this happiness? Inclusion into/for what? What are the costs of this inclusion? Who benefits from this inclusion? Which bodies form the “everybody” that the video maintains intellectually disabled children and young adults can be part of? Which bodies are welcomed in the “everyone” that the video claims has the right to be happy? What relationships and ways of being does the video envision and value?

In thinking about how embodiments are made to mean under neoliberalism, Chandler and Rice (2013) maintain that “neoliberalism values bodies that are self-sufficient, productive, and wholly independent,” (p. 235) and that people who do not participate in the market economy are understood as unproductive and therefore valueless. More importantly, Chandler and Rice (2013) note that within this culture of neoliberalism that prioritizes economic productivity, deviant bodies must be managed and controlled. Informed by Rice and Chandler’s understanding of neoliberalism as a system that reinforces sanism and ableism through and for the promotion of economic activities, I argue that the “happy life” that Dear Future Mom reflects and promotes is one that requires a neoliberal way of valuing bodies: the devaluation and separation of intellectual disability from personhood. Indeed, Dear Future Mom does not locate the possibility of/for happiness in difference. Instead, reinforcing dominant and oppressive neoliberal-
eral notions of normalcy, it conceptualizes intellectual disability as an undesirable and threatening condition that some bodies have, an individual problem that can, and must be, solved through the separation of intellectual disability from personhood with neoliberal attitudes and practices. Playing with the dominant understanding that the role of a “good mother” is to care for and protect her child, the video promises the scared future mom that Down syndrome will not be a threat to her child’s future and happiness as long as he/she is able “to do many things,” such as “work and earn money” and “rent an apartment and go live alone.” This understanding of happiness shows that, as Chandler and Rice (2013) argue, “the requirement to be happy feeds directly into a neoliberal agenda, which demands we must take care of ourselves both economically and emotionally in order to be considered good citizens.” (p.231) Similarly, by maintaining that “people with Down syndrome can live a happy life. Together we can make it possible,” the video suggests that intellectual disability not only is a non-essential thing that some bodies have, but also a thing that can and must be overcome and separated from personhood if happiness is to be attained. The video suggests that this can be possible if we (non-intellectually disabled, productive, independent, self-sufficient citizens and mothers), police the borders of “normal” neoliberal life by teaching and ensuring that intellectually disabled children and young adults normalize their disability by becoming productive, independent, and self-sufficient; thus, ultimately achieving neoliberal happiness. In other words, Dear Future Mom teaches both non-intellectually disabled and intellectually disabled people that “a [neoliberal] happy life” can be possible despite intellectual disability if intellectually disabled people manage to resemble us, the productive, independent, and self-sufficient citizens.

In this way, Dear Future Mom not only shows a wondrous rhetoric (Garland-Thomson, 2002) that suggests that achieving a “happy life” is a matter of courageously and individually overcoming intellectual
disability by maintaining a positive neoliberal attitude and engaging in neoliberal practices, but also a medical understanding of disability that fails to question and challenge the attitudinal, institutional, and architectural barriers that intellectually disabled people face, as well as the inequality, violence, and pain that result from these barriers. In effect, the white, middle-class intellectually disabled children and young adults in the video declare that “sometimes it will be difficult, very difficult, almost impossible [to live as an intellectually disabled person and achieve happiness],” however, they fail to explain what the external sources of these difficulties might be. This claim, which further illustrates the video’s understanding of intellectual disability as an individual problem in need of an individual solution, not only serves to depict the white, middle class intellectually disabled children and young adults in the video as courageous and worthy of admiration for achieving happiness despite Down syndrome, but also to obscure and reinforce the violence and oppression that derives from understanding disability as useless, non-valuable difference separable from personhood.

For instance, Dear Future Mom fails to acknowledge that living as a disabled person and being happy in a neoliberal world can “be difficult, very difficult, almost impossible” because of what Loree Erickson has termed the oppressive “cultures of undesirability.” Such cultures devalue and desexualize disabled people, thus causing them, as Erickson (2007) tells us, deep pain, depression, isolation, loneliness, sexual self-hate, and shame. Similarly, the video does not recognize that as, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2011) maintains, living as a disabled person in a neoliberal world that values economic productivity more than anything entails “struggle to live […], worry of how to survive economically […] live in panic about how we are going to get cash from capitalism to feed and clothe ourselves.” Last, but not least, the video fails to recognize that, as Erevelles and Minear (2010) illustrate, the association of race with disability has resulted in large
numbers of intellectually disabled students of color being subjected to segregation and confinement in so-called special-education, as well as in higher levels of unemployment, and higher arrest rates. Indeed, challenging the video’s claim that intellectually disabled children and young adults will be able to go to school and work “like everybody,” and its understanding of intellectual disability as an individual medical problem that can be separated from personhood and solved individually with courage, a positive attitude, and neoliberal practices, Erevelles and Minear (2010) argue that “individuals located perilously at the intersections of race, class, gender, and disability are constituted as non-citizens and (no)bodies by the very social institutions (legal, educational, and rehabilitational) that are designed to protect, nurture, and empower them” (p.127). This denial of the histories and realities of ableism, racism, and sexism demonstrates that Dear Future Mom does not value difference, nor does it really aims for the inclusion of all forms of difference. The “everybody” that the video maintains intellectually disabled children and young adults can be part of, and the “everyone” that the video claims has the right to be happy, are groups formed by economically productive, independent, self-sufficient, white, and middle class bodies. Importantly, the video’s denial of the ongoing oppression of disabled people of color, and the ways in which this ongoing racial oppression limits their opportunities, combined with its belief that overcoming intellectual disability is individually possible with the right (positive and neoliberal) attitudes and practices, has the potential to render intellectually disabled people of color culpable of their own misfortunes. In this way, the video positions white and middle class intellectually disabled people as the only ones worthy of admiration. In other words, the social costs of inclusion into a neoliberal society, and the (neoliberal) happiness that it envisions and values, may be the justification and reinforcement of different forms of oppression and dominant neoliberal notions of normalcy; and therefore, the maintenance of white privilege and an oppressive status quo.
Dear Future Mom’s attempt to normalize intellectually disability is ultimately, as Titchkosky and Michalko (2012) argue, an attempt to make disability disappear by assimilating it into the neoliberal taken-for-granted character of the world. Titchkosky and Michalko (2012) explain that, insofar as disability represents a threat to normalcy, disability is not only a problem some bodies have, but also the problem that others (non-disabled bodies) have, for “our construction of the normal world is based on a radical repression of disability” (Erevelles and Minear, 2010, p. 133). In this way, we can describe Dear Future Mom as a biopedagogical tool that polices the boundaries of neoliberal normalcy in order to attain the highest economically productive society, thus constructing certain (non-productive, dependent, incompetent, poor, non-white) bodies as “non-citizens and (no)bodies” (Erevelles and Minear, 2010, p. 127). Chandler and Rice (2013) maintain that “cultural representations [...] function as “biopedagogies” through conveying messages that teach disabled [...] people how we should live in our bodies; that we should feel shame in and for our bodies; that we should apologize for them; that we are objects of disgust; and that we should [...] fix our non-normativeness” (p. 230). As already discussed, one of the ways in which Dear Future Mom teaches disabled people how they should live is by suggesting that fixing their disability by doing neoliberal things like working and earning money will enable disabled people to have a “happy life.” Similarly, Dear Future Mom teaches disabled people that their disability should be fixed by suggesting that it is a threat to their happiness and future, a threat that is so real that mothers feel scared. Indeed, the multiple hugs between the intellectually disabled children and young adults and their mothers in the video suggest that intellectually disabled children and young adults need protection from Down syndrome if happiness and a bright future are to be achieved.

Chandler and Rice (2013) further note that biopedagogies teach disabled bodies “that we are suppose to be, or at least appear
to be, happy,” (Abstract) and that “being happy is a matter of attitude and, thus that it is our responsibility to be happy. If we are unhappy, it is us, and not the social world, that must change” (p.243). Indeed, all these teachings conform to the ultimate objective of biopedagogy, which, as Chandler and Rice (2013) argue, “is to produce good biocitizens, individuals who internalize instructions for managing their bodies/selves in order to optimize their health and happiness, increase their productivity, and strengthen society” (p.232). In this way, those “unruly” non-productive, dependent, incompetent, poor bodies who cannot assimilate into “normal” neoliberal society, which as Erevelles and Minear (2010) explain, are likely to be those “located perilously at the intersections of race, class, gender, and disability,” (p.127) become “non-citizens and (no) bodies” (p.127).

Resisting the video’s understanding of disability as an abnormal, undesirable, and threatening condition that some bodies have, rather than as a desirable and valuable identity, Chandler and Rice (2013) demonstrate how art offers disabled people a space to express happiness in difference, rather than in spite of it. In this way, the “moments of alterity in/of happiness” (Chandler and Rice, 2013, Abstract) that disabled people create and find through art resist the wondrous rhetoric that depicts them as courageous for having overcome disability and achieved happiness despite their disability. When Chandler and Rice (2013) speak of “moments of alterity in/of happiness,” I believe they mean to challenge normative and prescriptive notions of happiness which promote and reinforce sameness. In effect, they challenge the neoliberal version of happiness that, employing a medical understanding of disability, fails to question and challenge the attitudinal, institutional, and architectural barriers that intellectually disabled people face, and seeks to normalize disabled people. Importantly, Chandler and Rice (2013) demonstrate how the alterities in/of happiness that disabled people create through art not only allow them to express happiness in difference, but also to “hang on to dull rage and
pain within this alterity” (p.231). Art creates alterity in that it allows disabled people to express difference by taking control over their representation. In this way by simultaneously allowing the expression of happiness in difference, and acknowledging the suffering and rage caused by ableism, racism, sexism, and cultures of undesirability disabled artists open up “possibilities of and for living in, with, and alongside difference” (Chandler and Rice, 2013, p.243). Indeed, by challenging the understanding of disability as an individual problem in need of a solution, and the need to normalize it, disabled artists, unlike Dear Future Mom, open up possibilities for new ways of being, becoming, relating, and valuing that do not depend on one’s capacity to be economically independent and productive.

Similarly, challenging the video’s neoliberal version of happiness, and the way in which it only values productivity, independence, and self-sufficiency, Loree Erickson (2007), a queer femmegimp porn star academic, shows that sites of shame such as dependency, sex, and vulnerability can be sites to resist the dominant understanding of disability as threatening, worthless, non-essential, and undesirable, an understanding that, as demonstrated by Erevelles and Minear (2010), can lead to constituting certain bodies as “non-citizens and (no) bodies.” Erickson (2007) identifies self-initiated, sex-positive pornography as sites where disabled bodies can be “appreciated and celebrated for the very differences that are often used to justify [their] oppression” (p.42). Indeed, Erickson (2007) argues that self-initiated, sex-positive pornography made from a feminist disability liberation perspective has the potential to give disabled people back control of the ways in which they are represented; and that therefore, these sites can be “sources for potential sexual and body liberation” (p.42). Erickson (2007) further challenges the need to normalize disability and the neoliberal understanding of normalcy that values bodies for their self-sufficiency, independence, and economic productivity by showing how the mutuality of caring relationships offers new and valuable
ways of becoming and being in the world with others. In this way, Erickson (2007) teaches us that relationships between disabled and non-disabled people can be, unlike the ones depicted in Dear Future Mom, about more than just normalization of disability and protection from a threatening disability. The mutuality of these caring relationships, Erickson (2007) teaches us, can be a form of “coming together in difference,” a space where “a deeper knowledge is shared” (p.45).

Speaking about how disabled people struggle to survive in a capitalist and neoliberal society that dictates that “disabled, tired bodies that spend too much time in bed are useless,” Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2011), a queer disabled femme writer, performance artist and educator, also challenges the neoliberal devaluation of disability, vulnerability, weakness, and interdependence. Indeed, further illustrating how, as Erickson (2007) argues, sites of shame can be sites of resistance, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2011) tells us that “interdependence is what has saved [disabled bodies] time and time again— as queers and trans people, people of color, women, broke folks.” Demanding the recognition that disability is a valuable and viable life, and therefore resisting the video’s assumption that if disabled people find happiness, it is despite their disability and not because or in disability, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2011) declares that “the joy of this [chronically ill] body come from crip community and interdependence, but most of all, of the hard beauty of this life, built around all the time I must spend resting. The bed is the nepantla place of opening.” Here, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2011) also illustrates how, as Erickson (2007) suggests, mutual relationships offer new and valuable ways of being and becoming in the world with others. Furthermore, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha’s words (2007) demand a radical, non-neoliberal re-conceptualization of joy and productivity, one that does not depend on capitalist work, but on the recognition that there is value on disability, weakness, and vulnerability. Indeed, unlike Dear Future Mom, which conceptualizes
disability as an undesirable and threatening condition, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2011) states, “being chronically ill is a gift [...,] my illness opens the door to write be in the nepantla place.” It is this notion of disability as a gift, as an opening up of possibilities to exist “in between,” that Dear Future Mom fails to recognize.

References


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