Fabulous Fetishization: Kylie Jenner's *Interview* Cover and Wheelchair Identity Politics

by Jessica Benham, University of Pittsburgh

Abstract

Wearing a shiny black bodysuit, Dior shoes, and a collar, Kylie Jenner stares aimlessly downward, her unflexed arms lending no movement to the luxuriously golden wheelchair in which she sits. Because Jenner is able-bodied, this appearance on a December 2015 *Interview* cover incited critical reactions from the disability community. Disabled bodies are not generally associated with high fashion, making the use of a wheelchair in a fashion shoot is rare. While my work, like previous research on the Jenner family, considers Jenner's role as sex symbol, here I am also interested in her performance of *cripping up* and disability simulation, in which Jenner appropriates the wheelchair from communities who see it as a symbol of access and independence. Jenner's position in the fashion industry as a beautiful, sexualized woman is an interesting juxtaposition with her appropriation of the wheelchair, given that disabled individuals are so often portrayed as asexual. In this work, I position disability as a performance contextualized by culture, a perspective characterized by an understanding of disability as an embodied, enacted identity that is institutionally enforced. Understanding disability as performance allows a perspective on Jenner's use of the wheelchair as part of a dramatic scene, while understanding that Jenner does not have the same societally-enforced or embodied experience of a person who uses a wheelchair because of physical need. I argue that Jenner's performance, photographs taken in response to her shoot, and the discourse surrounding the controversy construct boundaries of what ethically acceptable wheelchair use should be, particularly with regard to media portrayals.

1 In my Instagram feed, Kylie Jenner's photograph did not necessarily seem out of place, blending in with the myriad photos of other designers, models, and actors. Garbed in black, with bling'd out BDSM-esque jewelry, Jenner's appearance on a flashy *Interview* (December 2015/January 2016) cover, photographed by Steven Klein, seemed almost modest by comparison to some of the other photographs in my Instagram feed. Not noticing anything unique about the chair in which she sat due to the artful cropping, I scrolled past the bling, onto Gigi's eyebrows, Gucci's new line, and Marvel's advertising for a new *Agents of Shield* episode. Reflecting my interests in both fashion and in sci-fi/fantasy, my Instagram feed is an amalgamation of potential food for my critical eye. Yet, the Jenner *Interview* cover did not attract my particular attention until my Facebook, filled with activist friends, exploded in protest over the details of the image unnoticed in my hurried scrolling. I returned to the photo: that chair in which Jenner sprawled, her lanky limbs positioned just so, was a wheelchair, and the complaints of my friends became contextualized.

2 While there have been several recent instances of the use of wheelchairs in fashion shoots or related settings, such as during New York Fashion Week (Freleng) or in Lady Gaga's music videos and performances (Grossberg), the *Interview* cover incited the most substantial reactions, including response photographs and critical articles. The nature of the reactions to the photograph, as well as Jenner's position as fashion icon and member of the already-controversial Jenner-Kardashian family, make the cover rhetorically intriguing. The Jenner-Kardashian family is famous for a variety of reasons, including their TV show *Keeping Up with the Kardashians,* Kim Kardashian's sex tape, Caitlyn Jenner's Olympic medal and transgender identity, relationships with other celebrities like Kanye West, and Kendall and Jenner's careers as models.

3 Jenner's cover, meant to be a recreation of Allen Jones' 1969 sculptures *Hatstand, Table, and Chair* (sculptures of submissive naked women as furniture), initiated a discourse about the appropriateness of using wheelchairs as fashion props, sparking debate about which bodies may legitimately use wheelchairs, and centering on the ethics of mobility device usage. This cover was for the art issue of *Interview,* which honored the work of Jones, a controversial British artist who, though he claims to be a feminist, has frequently been critiqued for the supposed misogyny of his work. *The Guardian* describes a variety of responses to his work:

> They were the subject of a celebrated Spare Rib essay by film-maker Laura Mulvey, "You Don't Know What Is Happening, Do You Mr Jones?", which drew on Freudian theory to brand the work as fetishistic and to essentially claim is was the result of a castration complex about which Jones was unaware. At the ICA in 1978 protesters let off stink bombs as a Jones exhibition, and on International Women's Day in 1986 a demonstrator poured pain stripper over *Chair* in the Tate in an attempt to literally deface it. ("Allen Jones…" para. 1)

Jones responded to these attacks:

> Anything I said to try to explain just came out as an excuse or a lame apology. I can see they are perfect images for an argument about the objectification of women, and if someone thinks that, it is very difficult to gainsay it. But it is a coincidental and unfortunate reading that has nothing to do with the work….I think of myself as a feminist and I don't need to defend my political stance. ("Allen Jones…" para. 2)

It is understandable, then, why a modern work honoring Jones might similarly inspire controversy. Though the cover photo clearly plays homage to *Hatstand, Table, and Chair,* the other photos from the series reference his other iconic works as an avant garde artist, including his 1972 *Waitress* series and a photograph of Kate Moss, wearing a golden body cast Allen had

designed in 1978, for *Pop Magazine* in 2013. Jones revisits the work with Kate Moss in November 2015, which is immediately before this issue of *Interview* was released. In this new work, Jones sculpted Kate Moss in stainless steel wearing a low-cut gown made of spray painted cast resin. When asked about the *Interview cover,* Jones responded, "This is fantastic! I have a drawer full [of] variations on the furniture sculpture idea…I've heard about this person [Kylie Jenner] and her family. The business of transgender, that's the flavor of the moment isn't it?" (McDermott, para. 31).

4 While there are clearly gendered elements within the work of Jones that are also present in the *Interview* shoot, photographer Klein also incorporated a reference to disability: a wheelchair. Klein explains that the use of the wheelchair was inspired by another source, a shoot he did with Tom Ford for *W* (November 2005). Klein recounts:

> We used very human-like dolls. Kylie and I discussed treating her like a doll. What happened when I show them for *W* with Tom was that the dolls were too heavy to carry, so I had to put them in a wheelchair to get them around. I often revisit pictures I've done before…to me, it was just playing with the idea of this pseudo-living doll, the different positions and setups I could do with her" (Brett, para. 3).

The Tom Ford shoot, titled *Fordbitten*, featured naked or mostly naked dolls in a variety of sexualized positions: kissing Ford, Ford watching them swim, dancing, in bathtubs, or in bed. The *Interview* cover photo is clearly inspired by the only photo featuring a doll in a wheelchair; the doll is being pushed by Ford, who wears a bathrobe. The doll, like Jenner, wears a corset, though the corset does not cover the breasts of the doll. The photo looks like it was taken through a window. Thus, the cover photo combines hallmarks of the work of both Jones and earlier work by Klein.

5 The use of the wheelchair seems eye-catching, as the disabled body is generally associated with medical discourse, not with high fashion. Thus, the use of a wheelchair, especially by an able-bodied model, in a fashion shoot, is rare (Phillips). To understand how the use of the wheelchair functions in this photoshoot, I begin by positioning both disability and gender as a performance contextualized by culture, a perspective characterized by an understanding of both disability and gender as embodied and institutionally enforced. I understand performance through the lens of Judith Butler, particularly from *Bodies that Matter,* where she outlines the complex relationship between bodies and the discourse that constrains and impels their materialization. Butler argues, that bodies are

"indissociable from the regulatory norms that govern their materialization" (2). In working from a Butlerian notion of performance and performativity, I build upon the work of disability studies scholars such as Deanna Fassett and Dana Morella, Carrie Sandahl, Jeffrey Brune and Daniel Wilson, Lennard Davis, and Robert McRuer. Disability studies scholars have long considered disability as performance. For instance, Lindblom & Dunn (2003) wrote, "Disability stems not from physical defect in particular human bodies, but rather from social constructions of ableness that inform categories such as 'normal' and 'disabled'" (p. 169). Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell reference Butler and then argue, "in the case of disability, we exist in bodies by negotiating a cultural repertoire of images that threaten to mire us in debilitating narratives of dysfunction and pathology" (169). Robert McRuer writes, "Butler's theory of gender trouble might be resignified in the context of queer/disability studies as what we could call 'ability trouble' – meaning not the so-called problem of disability but the inevitable impossibility, even as it is made compulsory, of an able-bodied identity" (94).

6 As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes: "To deal with images and narratives…is to focus on issues of representation . . . In this sense, disability is a story we tell about bodies" (523). Physical disability may appear to be a material reality, but just as Butler argues about sex and gender, "there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body" (10). Physical disability is not stable, and many wheelchair users do not need to use a wheelchair all the time and may carefully evaluate when and how to use their chair. Michael Rembis argues, "disabled people feel a tremendous pressure to appear as nondisabled as possible and whenever possible to mask the extent of their impairment(s)" (117). Simi Linton, in *Claiming Disability,* recounts:

> Many people have told me that when family pictures were taken as they were growing up, they were removed from their wheelchairs, or they were shown only from the waist up, or they were excluded from pictures altogether. The messages are that this part of you, your disability or the symbol of disability, your wheelchair, is unacceptable, or, in the last case, you are not an acceptable member of the family. (20-21)

Just as not all gender performance is drag, so not all disability performance is 'cripping up,' a performance in which an able-bodied individual uses a mobility device as a prop. Such 'cripping up' has been, at times, understood to be offensive, analogous to blackface. Carrie Sandahl writes, "Casting non-disabled actors as disabled characters is called pejoratively 'cripping up,'

referencing the outdated practice of white actors 'blacking up' to play African American characters" (236).

7 Understanding disability as performance and compulsory able-bodiedness as performativity allows a perspective on Jenner's use of the wheelchair as part of a dramatic scene, while also understanding that Jenner, in her assumed able-bodiedness, does not have the same societally-enforced or embodied experience of a person who uses a wheelchair because of physical need. Here, I work from Tobin Siebers' notion of 'disability as masquerade'. I assume, based on other photographs from the same shot in which Jenner is shown standing as well as the family's enhanced media presence, that she is not does not have a walking impairment and therefore had no physical reason to be using the wheelchair. As a result, the theoretical constructs of 'cripping up' and 'disability simulation'[1] are relevant.

8 To facilitate my examination of the Jenner *Interview* cover, I collected the Jenner cover shot, other images from the same shoot, various images created and posted online in response to the Jenner photographs, articles and social media posts about the cover, including critiques, and the response from *Interview* to the criticism. Interestingly, while many of the photos from the same shoot remain on Jenner's Instagram, the wheelchair shot has been removed. Examination of these artifacts will allow me to develop an understanding of the controversy surrounding the photographs, critique of the use of wheelchairs by able-bodied, wealthy, famous individuals, and provide an examination of the construction of visual representation of disability. Ultimately, I argue, the way bodies are situated in wheelchairs or otherwise matters, and performance of wheelchair use is an identity politic which constructs boundaries of what acceptable wheelchair use looks like. The way in which Jenner's body and the bodies of individuals who created response photographs exist in these images, performs a certain kind of embodiment, first, by creating connections between 'cripping up,' failure, and disidentification; second, by reinforcing common tropes of passivity and victimization; and third, by revealing that the wheelchair is a contested space over which agency is exerted.

[1] Cripping up: In which an able-bodied individual 'crips up' by using a mobility device as a prop; Disability simulation: In which the purpose of using the wheelchair might be an attempt to better understand disabled experiences

Cripping Up, Failure, and Disidentification

9 Wearing a shiny black Tableaux Vivants body suit, Dior shoes, and a collar by Dawnamatrix, Jenner stares downward, positioned diagonally to the camera. The wheels of the chair slightly askew, the image has an air of aimlessness, as Jenner's relaxed arms and downward gaze suggest no move to an ultimate destination. The wheelchair itself is glamorous, marked by a luxurious golden hue. Jenner is lit from the front, her shadow obvious on the institutional white wall behind her. In an alternative take of the photo, one which did not appear on the cover of *Interview*, Jenner has her left leg raised in the air, her eyes now focused on her foot. In all the images from the shoot, she seems almost doll-like, her skin a pale, deathly alabaster, echoing the otherworldly nature of many of Jones' portrayals of women. In yet another shot, Jenner wears shoes on both her hands and feet, wearing a black latex body suit with no material covering her buttocks, a hallmark of the work of Jones, reminiscent of assless chaps. Another series of shots has Jenner posing as a waitress, carrying a tray with a glass of wine on it, or sensually eating an ice cream cone. Because Jenner is able-bodied, her performance can be read as cripping up; thus, considering the *Interview* photo shoot through the lens of performance and embodiment reveals places of tension where the role-play falls apart, where Jenner's performance of disability is in tension with her apparent able-bodiedness.

10 The phrase *cripping up* is generally used to refer to able-bodied actors playing disabled characters on television or film. Considering the connection between blackface and affecting a crippled gait in this history of minstrelsy, *cripping up* has historically problematic implications. Additionally, as I have argued in an earlier work, "despite being a common practice in Hollywood films, the portrayal of a disabled character by a non-disabled actor usually results in a performance that does not fully embody disability" (175). In this paper, I more broadly use this term to apply to the performance, in any context, of disability by a non-disabled body.

11 *Disability simulation* is also a relevant concept, referring to exercises, generally meant to be educational, in which people attempt to mimic, for a short time, the experience of being disabled. These simulations might include, for instance, using a wheelchair or walking around with a blindfold on for a day. Though meant to have a positive impact on how people view disabled individuals, simulations have been criticized for their ineffectiveness as well as their problematic implications. For instance, Silverman et al. finds, "the results of two experiments indicate that experiential simulation of blindness causes people to judge blind people as less

capable . . . these results suggest that disability simulation may increase stigmatization of blind people" (469). Sally French similarly notes, that not only is "there little evidence that simulation exercises bring about positive attitude change," but also that they "do not simulate the experience of disability. Simulation exercises give a totally false impression of what it is like to be disabled" (259). Further, Emily Ladau argues, "Herein lies the problem with disability simulation. It may make a person more aware of another person's experiences, but it doesn't dig deep to the root of discrimination against people with minority identities" (para. 4). In this sense, Jenner's use of a wheelchair can be read as simulating the experience of disability, research on simulation exercises in relevant. However, based on the public statement given by *Interview* for the photoshoot, I doubt that the intention of the photographs was to be educational.

12 The position of Jenner's legs in the secondary shot of her in the wheelchair, as well as the photographs of her standing, creates a tension between the wheelchair use and her lived, embodied experience. While, on one hand, there exists the possibility for a wheelchair-using person with a disability to identify with Jenner in this photograph, this possibility is undermined when other photographs in the same series demonstrate that Jenner does not have a mobility impairment. José Esteban Muñoz uses 'disidentification' to "be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (4). Muñoz was specifically referring to the experiences of queers of color, "subjects whose identities are formed in response to the cultural logics of heteronormativity, white supremacy, and misogyny" (5). In discussing disability in conversation with disidentification, I echo McRuer's assertion that compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodieness are mutually constitutive. McRuer writes, "the system of compulsory able-bodiedness that produces disability is thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness" (89). Thus, I argue here that disidentification can also be practiced in response to the cultural logic of compulsory able-bodiedness.

13 In the second wheelchair photograph, Jenner's body is contorted with her leg held up in the air; she still wears the collar and appears almost entrapped by the chair, revealing a contradiction between Jenner's apparent able-bodiedness in lifting her leg and her position on the chair. This could be read as a more ambivalent portrayal of disability, as not all wheelchair users are paralyzed, yet alternatively, the way her body is contained by the chair suggests immobility.

Further, because of the inclusion in the collection of photographs of her standing, the wheelchair is revealed to be a prop, and the illusion of disability breaks down. Perhaps this is a productive form of failure; the tension between disability and ability evident in this series of photographs creates a moment of possible disidentificatory desire predicated on visuality. Muñoz further argues that, "identities-in-difference emerge from a failed interpellation within the dominant public sphere" (7). There is a possibility here that a wheelchair user could both simultaneously disidentify with the portrayal of wheelchair use in these photos by a woman read as white, able-bodied, straight and cisgender, while also desiring to be like Jenner; this tension between disidentification and desire, in response to this photo and other mass media portrayals of disability, is what, according to Muñoz, allows for the formation of a counter public sphere. Jenner's white femininity facilitates a reading of her as vulnerable, but also as an innocent, as delicate but also as safe, not threatening

14 McRuer, too, speaks of impossibility and failure, though he is more interested in the impossibility of both able-bodied and heterosexual identities than in failed interpellation. He argues:

> Think…of how many institutions in our culture are showcases for able-bodied performance. Moreover, as with heterosexuality, this repetition is bound to fail, as the ideal, able-bodied identity can never, once and for all, be achieved. Able-bodied identity and heterosexual identity are linked in their mutual impossibility and in their mutual incomprehensibility" (93).

Certainly, the portrayal of Jenner as both disabled and abled in the same photo shoot emphasizes the impossibility and incomprehensibility of able-bodied identity, but the same can, perhaps, be said of her portrayal of heterosexual identity. In other images from the shoot, Jenner wears a golden bodycast, corset-like in structure, which is reminiscent of the costume made by Jones for Kate Moss for the 2013 'Body Armour' shoot. In several of these, she poses with a man, who, crouching on all fours, performs a supportive function to Jenner, who sits on or above him. In both, he stares at the ground, while she maintains an even gaze forward in one while staring downward in the other. Though posing with a masculine figure would seem to underscore her supposed identity as heterosexual, she never looks at him, undercutting any presumption of desire or object choice. Like the wheelchair, the man seems to be only a prop, faceless, and wearing a nondescript black suit. Nevertheless, the inclusion of a male figure in the photographs of Jenner when combined with her position as sex symbol suggests a heteronormative lens. The

lack of any gaze toward the other, however, hints at the impossibility of certainty. The positioning of the man also disrupts the comparison to the work of Jones: here, the male figure is the furniture upon which Jenner poses, rather than Jenner being positioned as the furniture. This reversal of position suggests a possible reversal of agency: Jenner has power here. Perhaps there is something rather queer about this reversal, in the sense that Butler means when she writes, "The term 'queer' emerges as an interpellation that raises the question of the status of force and opposition, of stability and variability, 'within' performativity" (226).

15 Jenner, positioned as empowered, sexualized agent rather than furniture, departs from traditional depictions of wheelchair-using bodies as asexual. In all the pictures from this shoot, Jenner is explicitly sexualized, both inside and outside of the wheelchair; given that Jenner had just turned 18, she may have wanted to break the image of the child she was when the TV show first began to air. Beyond the shoot, Jenner, as a member of the Jenner-Kardashian family, has sex symbol status (McClain). The popularity of the Kardashian and Jenner women is due, at least initially to Kim's sex tape and the resulting sexualization of all the women in the family (Sastre). While this portrayal has the potential to challenge stereotypes connecting wheelchair use and asexuality, Jenner's able-bodiedness complicates the message; like the waitress outfit and the collar, the wheelchair is just another prop in Jenner's role-play. Thus, the connection between the wheelchair and sexuality in this shoot seems also to fall apart. Given that people whose actual lived experience involves wheelchair use are often deprived of sexual agency, a concern noted by Kay Inckle, Paul Longmore, and Aristotle Nicolaidis, the use of the wheelchair as a prop has the potential to cause offense. Therefore, the disconnect between the performance of disability and the ease of Jenner's return to a compulsory able-bodiedness complicates positive readings of her wheelchair use.

Glitzy BDSM: Tropes of Passivity, Victimization, and Impoverishment

16 Calling wheelchairs "the archetypal symbol of disability" (6), Gerald Goggin and Christopher Newell write that wheelchairs are simultaneously liberating and controlling and further argue, "in a different set of social circumstances the meanings and structures associated with the wheelchair might be different, and it is worth asking whether a more liberating form of mobility might exist for people who currently use wheelchairs if they constituted some of the more powerful members of society" (11). Now a phrase considered offensive but at one time

more commonplace, 'wheelchair bound' underscores a social narrative in which the wheelchair is seen as solely confining and controlling, rather than liberatory. To demonstrate the disconnect between disability and independence in common cultural understandings, Petra Kuppers uses the example of *The Living Museum of Fetishized Identities* by Guillermo Gómez-Peña, whose installation features a non-disabled person sitting in a wheelchair; she argues, "in his mobilization of the wheelchair, Gómez-Peña brings together two contradictory images that merge, leaving spectators with a sense of cultural unease: the independent and strong guy and the wheelchair user" (135). Simi Linton, in *Reassigning Meaning,* argues, "Language that conveys passivity and victimization reinforces certain stereotypes when applied to disabled people" (168). Linton continues:

> The ascription of passivity can be seen in language used to describe the relationship between disabled people and their wheelchairs. The phrases 'wheelchair bound' or 'confined to a wheelchair' are frequently seen in newspapers and magazines, and heard in conversation…the various terms imply that a wheelchair restricts the individual, holds a person prisoner. (169)

17 Because of the use of BDSM gear in the shoot, the cover shot plays into these stereotypes by positioning Jenner as bound in a wheelchair. Literally bound by her collar, Jenner does not use the chair, but rather poses upon it; Jenner's shoes have a strap around the ankle, making them appear, at first glance, to be bound directly to the chair. Similar to what Beth Haller and Sue Ralph found in their analysis of US and UK advertising campaigns, these advertising images promote body ideals as Jenner is tall, thin, and normatively attractive as well as being able-bodied, but the use of BDSM gear plays into the fears held by able-bodied individuals of becoming wheelchair bound. Paul Longmore wrote, "What we fear, we often stigmatize and shun and sometimes seek to destroy. Popular entertainments depicting disabled characters allude to these fears and prejudices, or address them obliquely or fragmentarily, seeking to reassure us about ourselves" (132). If Jenner was actively using the chair, as opposed to sitting doll-like upon it, perhaps her portrayal would lend itself less to interpretations of fear.

18 Related to passivity and victimization are stereotypes of the impoverished disabled individual, a common trope noted by Linton in her book *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*, among others. Jenner's performance of disability is anything but impoverished. The wheelchair, a gilded gold, does not feel real but rather seems a glamorous fiction. The glitz of this scene, underscored by the carefully curated wealthy image of the Jenner-Kardashian family,

ignores the barriers to economic success faced by disabled individuals. One of the many barriers to success is lack of physical accessibility to places of employment. Goggin and Newell write, "While the wheelchair in the abstract may be theoretically regarded as an aid to mobility, it is only when the real world is designed to enable equitable access for people in wheelchairs that the wheelchair can be seen as an effective enabler. Without the necessary pavement, curbs, ramps, and funding of so-called access, the wheelchair as a system has different meanings and effects" (8). At the time of the publication of this issue of *Interview*, concerns regarding accessibility in the United States would have been particularly salient, given the consideration of H.R. 3765, the ADA Education and Reform Act of 2015, by the US Congress. This bill would have limited the scope of accessibility requirements under the ADA and further limited enforcement; an updated version of this bill, H.R. 620, is under consideration at the time of writing. But even without legislative threats to accessibility, disabled people in the US who need wheelchairs may face many barriers to receiving one. Goggin and Newell note that literature rarely questions, "who controls access to the wheelchair, and who are the gatekeepers of ownership of the wheelchair" (9).

19 Given that the United States has some of the best protections for disability rights in the world, the relatively privileged position of disabled people in the US pales in comparison to the experiences of people with disabilities in other countries. For example, in *The Right to Maim,* Jasbir Puar notes that, in Palestine, liberatory disability rights narratives do not resonate. She writes: "Becoming disabled is not a before-and-after event but an ongoing navigation with quotidian forms of blockage that draw populations in and out of debilitating and capacitating experiences. Efforts to claim disability as an empowered identity and to address ableism in Palestine will continue to be thwarted until the main source of producing debilitation – the occupation – is ended" (160-161). We cannot talk about gender or about disability without also understanding how race, class, culture, and context, among other elements, permit and constrain certain readings of gender and disability. Yet, rather than framing this nexus through the lens of Intersectionality, Puar suggests, in *Disability,* that we should move beyond Intersectionality to consider 'assemblages,' a way of thinking about bodies and contexts that does not separate one identity from another; in *The Right to Maim,* Puar argues that one way in which we can employ 'assemblages' is to think about ways in which certain bodies are more often debilitated while others are capacitated. Thus, rather than thinking merely about tropes of passivity and

victimization, we might think of the ways in which those tropes come together to capacitate some, while debilitating others.

20 Jenner's performance occurs in an economically–privileged, Western context, though how it was disseminated beyond this context is difficult to determine. Yet, even in this context, it is troubling that Klein is able to procure wheelchairs for fashion shoots, while disabled consumers must rely on doctors to prescribe its medical necessity and hope that their insurance, if they even have insurance, will pay. As a multiply disabled person myself, with many disabled friends, the amount of *Go Fund Me's* for wheelchairs that come across the feeds of my social media is disheartening. The glamorous appearance of Jenner's wheelchair, combined with the reality of the expensive, and at times out-of-reach, nature of wheelchairs, suggests that the 'assemblage' at play, on one hand, potentially capacitates disabled people by making the use of a wheelchair in fashion appropriate yet on the other hand does nothing to disrupt the ongoing debilitation of disabled people in the US and elsewhere. Elements of capacitation and power are suggested by the public statement offered by *Interview* regarding the use of the wheelchair in the shoot. An *Interview* spokesperson, when asked about the negative response to the photo, said:

> At *Interview*, we are proud of our tradition of working with great artists and empowering them to realize their distinct and often bold visions. The Kylie Jenner cover by Steven Klein, which references the British artist Allen Jones, is a part of this tradition, placing Kylie in a variety of positions of power and control and exploring her image as an object of vast media scrutiny. (para. 7)

If Jenner's position in the wheelchair is meant to be one of power and control, the successful fulfillment of this intention would disrupt the social narrative associating the wheelchair with passivity and victimization. Yet, the use of equipment that explicitly bound Jenner in the chair seems to counteract the intended message.. Even as we acknowledge the role of consent and the agency and empowerment of subs within BDSM, we cannot assume that all viewers of the photos understand BDSM as anything other than subjugation, especially given the popular culture portrayal of BDSM in *Fifty Shades of Gray*. Further, the photo shoot establishes a metaphorical connection between dolls and Jenner, as acknowledged by Klein when he discussed treating Jenner "like a doll" (Brett, para. 3) and by Jenner when she talked about her make-up for the day. Rebecca Rose, for *Cosmopolitan*, drew attention to captions on one of Jenner's Instagram photos from the shoot: "Plastic doll vibes ;) pulling my face back with tape all day was much worth it for this amazing art cover…so dope!" Given that dolls do not move of their

own accord, even metaphorically positioning Jenner as a doll in a wheelchair has implications that disrupt the claim that this shoot was meant to position Jenner as powerful. In this way, the very particular styling of the photo shoot, combined with the aforementioned usage of the wheelchair as a mere prop, establishes a connection between dolls and people who use wheelchairs, again returning to a trope of passivity.

Agency: The Wheelchair as Contested Space

21 The tension between passivity and power in the Jenner photos suggests that we might understand the wheelchair as contested space. The shoot ends with a series of photographs which make explicit the doll metaphor; in one, Jenner is motionless and stiff, placed in a box marked "fragile" while wearing lingerie. In the two images that follow, Jenner, with arms and legs unnaturally bent, is held like a doll by a man who is either almost off camera or hidden behind her body. Whether positioned in a wheelchair, as a doll, or sexualized as a waitress, the photographs of Jenner allow her no movement beyond how she is posed. Frustrated with this portrayal, some wheelchair users responded with supposedly more realistic photographs. While I acknowledge that Klein's photography is not intended to be an authentic portrayal of disability, since his style is to create a fiction or disrupt our perception of reality, many of those who responded seemed to desire a more realistic portrayal. For example, Arden Lee, a student born with spinal muscular atrophy who uses a wheelchair, wrote:

> When I saw Kylie Jenner's photoshoot, I was upset. I became even angrier when I realized the wheelchair was supposed to represent the struggles she's gone through. I'm sure she's gone through some struggles in her life, but that's no excuse to use a wheelchair as the metaphor. People stare at me because I'm different, not because I'm making a statement. It's difficult to believe that Jenner- someone who is the stereotypical version of Western beauty and probably has not had to work very hard to get to where she is now – will have the same struggles as someone in a wheelchair. She used it to be edgy whereas real people with physical disabilities are seen as pitiable. (Warren, para. 4)

22 Arden's photograph is a mirror selfie; she smiles, looking into the cell phone, and is wearing glasses and polka dot navy dress. She raises her left arm in a gesture that seems to say, "what's up with that, Jenner?" Perhaps one reason for the desire for a more realistic portrayal in Klein's photographs is the relative lack of such portrayals in society at large. Arden's statement that "real people with physical disabilities are seen as pitiable" echoes concerns in disability theory about the tropes discussed above. Arden's frustration, here, seems to be the very

disconnect between Jenner's capacity to use the wheelchair as a place of power and the ways in which people who use wheelchairs out of physical need are generally debilitated in society. Yet, Jenner's use of a wheelchair created an opportunity for Arden, who in posting a response photo to social media, which was then picked up by mass media, challenges these tropes. Without Jenner's photo shoot, this opportunity would not have existed. Ophelia Brown, who tweeted a similar wheelchair selfie in response to Jenner, stated,

> Having an able-bodied person pose in a wheelchair like it's a fashion accessory, it trivializes the concept of a wheelchair…it's not a prop, it's not something that I can easily get in and out of. It's not something that I want. It's something that I need to get to school, to go out with friends, to live a normal life ("Ophelia Brown's…" para. 5-6).

Ophelia's concern, here, seems to be about the use of the wheelchair as a temporary prop, rather than a capacitating mobility device which enables engagement with the world.

23 Gemma Flanagan, a disabled model, recreated Jenner's photoshoot a little more precisely than Arden and Ophelia by wearing a similar bodysuit, collar, shoes, and hairstyle, with a slight change: she is photographed next to her wheelchair, but not in it. On this choice, Flanagan states, "The Kylie shoot didn't make sense to me . . . it seems an able-bodied woman is more acceptable than a disabled woman. So I asked Bri to photograph me without my wheelchair. I thought maybe that would be more 'acceptable'" (Blott, para. 15-16). Flanagan seems to be challenging the potential for Jenner's shoot to facilitate greater acceptance of wheelchair users in fashion shoots.

24 Model Lauren Wasser, an amputee, recreated the cover photograph almost exactly, including the golden wheelchair. She added sunglasses and propped her non-prosthetic leg on a pile of fashion and celebrity magazines featuring the Jenner-Kardashian family. Her act of stepping on the photographed faces of the Jenner-Kardashian family suggests defiance. She posted the photograph to her Instagram, with the caption "real life" (Mazziotta, para. 3). The caption, again, indicates a desire for more realistic representations of disability in the media.

25 Erin Tatum, born with cerebral palsy, also created a response photograph using a black bodysuit, similar shoes, and a similar haircut. Her wheelchair, unlike Jenner's, is motorized and she looks up, rather than down, her hands are on her legs rather than on the wheels of the chair. Her skin is less starkly white than Jenner's and she wears red nail polish. Tatum states, "I can barely get people to make eye contact with me, let alone land a cover shoot. If being in a wheelchair is trendy now, I've apparently been a trendsetter since before Kylie was born" (Blair,

para. 6-7). Tatum's photo sparked a series of copycat photos on Tumblr, including Jordyn Taylor and Annie Elainey who posed in their wheelchairs in a black tank top and black lingerie respectively (Blair).

26 As the response photographs demonstrate, the wheelchair is a contested space over which agency may be exerted and the meaning of its use may be negotiated, interpreted, appropriated, and reappropriated. Despite its historic associations, the wheelchair, conceptually and legally, cannot be owned by those who use it daily, those who use it out of physical need, or those who do so out of a need for attention, among any other reasons. However, given the ways in which this photoshoot reinforces common tropes and stereotypes, I argue that there are more and less ethically acceptable ways to be photographed in a wheelchair. Cassandra Phillips asserts, "Acceptable disability imagery derives from lived experience. Persons with disability need the space to tell their story, the journey of their body" (206). As long as the able-bodied models are the norm, disabled individuals are not as privy to the storytelling, artistic space of fashion; thus, because of historic discrimination against disabled bodies in fashion, the use of a wheelchair by an able-bodied, wealthy model continues to be problematic. However, as Arden, Ophelia, Gemma, and Erin demonstrated, Klein and Jenner gave them a platform to share their own journeys and stories; while this does not make the Jenner photo shoot less problematic, it suggests that wheelchair users have the agency to reclaim the symbol of their movement. Certainly, disabled models are becoming ever so slightly more common in the world of fashion: Danielle Shekpuk at NY Fashion Week 2014 (Freleng), FTL Moda NY Fashion Week 2015 Show (Amos), Tokyo Fashion Week 2015 (London), and the Hooligans & Kardashian Kids clothing line (McGlensey) are all examples. However, the use of disabled models is not without problematic implications either. Maria MacKinney-Valentin writes "While this tendency to use disabled models may appear to be a move towards greater tolerance, there might also be an element of taking subversive images and using them in marketing on a more symbolic level where what is *foul* becomes fair because of the potential for distinction, regardless of the social reality of the images" (19). Garland-Thomson acknowledges that "the juxtaposition of the elite body of a visually normative fashion model with the mark of disability forces the viewer to reconfigure assumptions about what constitutes the attractive, the desirable, and the livable life," but calls this practice "cripsploitation" (525-6). High fashion modeling is all about having

something unique to offer; when a person's uniqueness is constructed as their disability, seeing the disability rather than the person as a whole is a likely result.

Conclusion

27 Jenner's performance of wheelchair use, and the response photographs claiming to more authentically perform the same, challenge us to consider how the representation of wheelchair use functions in a high fashion context. An intriguing combination of elements from the work of Jones and Klein, Jenner's performance inspires a disidentificatory response from disabled audience members, a desire to recreate the performance while also distancing oneself. Though Jenner often plays a part in the production of compulsory able-bodiedness and heterosexuality, this photo shoot suggests the impossibility of performing either perfectly. Though Jenner's sexualization within the wheelchair has the potential to disrupt the connection between disability and asexuality, the use of the wheelchair as merely a prop in her role play troubles such a positive reading. Because of the use of BDSM gear in the shoot, Jenner's performance reinforces social narratives that connect disability with passivity and victimhood. In this context, the glitz and glamor of the set and the golden wheelchair does not correspond with the lived reality of most disabled individuals, both in the US and beyond. Jenner propagates a glamorous vision of wheelchair use which, like the Jenner-Kardashian reality TV shows, is not realistic, but ignores the lack of job opportunities and economic assistance given to disabled people in the USA. Though Jenner's use of the wheelchair is intended to place her in a position of power, social discourse surrounding wheelchair use, the use of the wheelchair as a prop, and the positioning of Jenner as doll-like, do not facilitate such a reading of these photographs. Nevertheless, Klein's photographs of Jenner resulted in an opportunity for disabled wheelchair users to respond, granting them a platform through which to challenge common tropes and stereotypes of disability. Furthermore, though a chair with wheels on it is not a concept that can be legally owned by any one group, it is symbolically associated with the independent living movement, a marginalized group, and their calls for freedom and mobility, making the use of a wheelchair in a bondage fashion photo shoot disconnected from the lived experience of disabled wheelchair users.

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