

Article

Crippling Girlhood on Service Dog Tok

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Abstract: This article explores how disabled girl handlers crip girlhood on service dog tok, the emergent subculture on TikTok comprised of disabled handlers who upload and post videos about their everyday life in partnership with a service dog. Looking at the TikTok accounts and self-representational practices of three disabled girl handlers—Ava of @avaandcheddar, Claire of @rosie.the.sd, and Lexy of @muslinservicedogmom28—this article traces how their videos evince an audio-visual representation of interspecies intimacy, a becoming with, that complicates the familiar story of the disabled girl handler/service dog dyad that one might see or scroll past online—one of rehabilitative exceptionalism, disability disavowal, and chrononormative understandings of girlhood. On service dog tok, Ava, Claire, Lexy, and their service dogs broadcast the quotidian and move against a service dog sentimentalism that seeks to depoliticize disability and the relationship between disabled handlers and their service dogs. Their videos produce and circulate a nuanced understanding of interdependence, care, and ableism forged via the mutual entanglement with their service dogs. Ultimately, this article argues that disabled girl handlers on service dog tok upend what we think we know about disabled girls and girlhoods, recasting the meanings ascribed to their bodyminds, experiences, and their relationships with their service dogs in their own terms.

Keywords: disabled girlhood; disability media studies; service dogs; TikTok



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1. Introduction

On 28 November 2023, TikTok creator Ava of the account @avaandcheddar uploaded a slideshow video. In it, a series of photos juxtaposing material objects loops to the background audio, Father John Misty's "Real Love Baby" (2017). The first image juxtaposes a pair of black, leather Mary Jane heels on the left against four black and grey dog booties with reflective patches on the right. The next photo is a human hairbrush with a wooden handle juxtaposed against an assortment of dog grooming brushes. The third photo in the set has a gold pendant and a pearl necklace in the left frame, and in the right frame is a red leash that reads "SERVICE DOG" in bold, black letters alongside a matching red leather collar. Then, there is a collapsed white cane on the left, and a guide dog harness and vest on the right. The vest is also red and is embroidered with a plague doctor mask and hat, and under that, it reads "her safety depends on my focus". As the viewer moves through the photoset, it becomes clear that the items on the left belong to Ava, who is a human. Ava is nineteen years old and is visually impaired; she also has albinism. The items on the right belong to Cheddar—her Golden Retriever guide dog. In the description of the video, Ava clarifies: "A series of photos that have some of my belongings on the left, and cheddars [sic] on the right. [...] Both sides of items correlate and are meant to [b]e versions of each o[t]her". The video is a playful display of the quotidian life and stuff of a disabled girl handler and her service dog. It is also an audio-visual representation of interspecies intimacy, a becoming with, as Haraway [1] might say, that complicates the familiar story of the disabled girl handler/service dog dyad that one might see or scroll past online—one of rehabilitative exceptionalism, disability disavowal, and chrononormative understandings of girlhood.

On the wildly popular short-form app TikTok¹, disabled girl handlers like Ava have carved out their own space; if one searches “service dog”, countless videos of disabled girl handlers and their service dog companions present themselves to scroll through. Ranging from showing off collections of service dog vests and accouterments to “POV” (point of view) videos from the purported view of the service dog, on service dog tok, or the emergent subculture on TikTok comprising disabled handlers who upload and post videos about their everyday life in partnership with a service dog, disabled girl handlers broadcast the quotidian. They perform political work educating the casual viewer about disability through narrativizing their daily rhythm with their service dogs. In the comment sections of their videos, one witnesses how their accounts facilitate the cultivation of digital disability intimate publics, or “porous, affective scene[s] of [disability] identification among strangers that promise a certain experience of belonging” [3,4]. A community of disabled viewers, some of them handlers, too, gather in mutual recognition, swap stories of ableist microaggressions, ask for dog toy recommendations, and ruminate on their love of their service dog.

This article explores how on service dog tok, disabled girl handlers narrativize their everyday experiences living in partnership with their service dogs to more fully understand how TikTok operates as a space of disabled girl subjectivity construction, cripistemological production, and disability community. To do this work, I look to the TikTok accounts and self-representational practices of three disabled girl² handlers³/TikTok creators and their service dogs, Ava and her guide dog Cheddar of @avaandcheddar, whom I briefly introduced above, Claire and her service dog in training Rosie, of @rosie.the.sd, and Lexy and her service dog Lady, of @muslimservicedogmom28. Through closely analyzing a collection⁴ of Ava, Claire, and Lexy’s videos, ranging from educational videos that demonstrate their service dogs “tasking”, to videos that are humorous clapbacks to ableist microaggressions, this article argues that on service dog tok, disabled girl handlers *crip* girlhood. To crip or crippling in the simplest of characterizations is a practice that interrogates or unsettles assumptions about disability and disabled people, and specifically in the case of this article and the larger project this draws from, assumptions about disabled girls and girlhoods [5–9]. On service dog tok, Ava, Claire, and Lexy upend what we think we know about disabled girls and girlhoods, recasting the meanings ascribed to their bodyminds and experiences, and their relationships with their service dogs, in their own terms.

Most strikingly, as gestured above with Ava, the stories that disabled girl handlers tell on service dog tok about their lived realities, desires, and relationships with their service dogs are remarkably different than the stories found in viral⁵ news stories, television, film, and popular discourse. Their stories are in contradistinction to the ubiquitous sentimentalized representations in popular media culture that position the service dog as a “savior” of the disabled person, or as an exceptional technology of rehabilitation whose valuation is determined in relation to their capacity to fold their disabled handler back into strictures of normative society. In popular media stories about service dogs that feature disabled children—girls, specifically—the service dog is often lauded for providing the disabled girl with a new future, which reinforces medicalized understandings of disability and chrononormative understandings of girlhood [4]. In many ways, this makes sense. Disability has historically signaled a future foreclosed, or, in Alison Kafer’s words, a “future no one wants” because it is one that “bears too many traces of the ills of the present to be desirable” [5]. In our normative imaginary, disability interrupts or forestalls the disabled girl’s development or her capacity to grow up, if we conceptualize growing up as the march forward from the dependence of girlhood to the independence of womanhood, defined by “marriage and reproduction”, and in neoliberal⁶ times, productivity and self-optimization [5]. Developmental progress—“becoming adult”—is tied to a conceptualization of “growing up” that presupposes a linear understanding of time and requires proper temporalization of bodyminds (toward maximum efficiency) [12]. The service dog is often represented as a technology that brings the disabled girl back into time—rehabilitating—or assimilating the disabled girl back into this chrononormative

understanding of girlhood and development. However, as this article will show, disabled girl handlers and their service dogs on service dog tok belie this positioning. On service dog tok, viewers witness a more complicated representation of the service dog/disabled handler relationship. It is one of reciprocal care and mutual entanglement: a queercrip human–animal assemblage. For the disabled girl handler, TikTok and its unique platform affordances facilitate the conditions of possibility for the circulation and production of a politicized understanding of disabled girlhood—as well as disability writ large—that is cultivated via their *becoming with* the service dog.

In offering insights gleaned from disabled girls' self-representational practices on TikTok, this article contributes to the growing field of disability media studies. Disability media studies seeks to understand “the relationship between disability and media” by investigating how “disability shapes media, texts, and industries”, and vice versa, “how our media shapes what it means to be disabled or able-bodied” [13]. In other words, disability media studies, as a field, attempts to go beyond textual or discursive analyses of disability representation by staking a claim in the necessity of investigating disability in relation to media circuits of production and reception. With that in mind, this article pays close attention to the ways in which the unique aspects of TikTok, as a social media short-form video hosting platform, inform the construction of disability subjectivity and identity, the cultivation of disability culture, and the dissemination of disability epistemologies. In focusing on self-representational practices, this article works in tandem with other scholarship in disability media studies that seeks to understand how disabled people create media and consequently “transform” or crip media culture writ large [14–16].

This research also contributes to the growing body of literature in girlhood studies and girls' media studies that centers the disabled girl as the subject of inquiry, seeking to understand more thoroughly how disabled girls and girlhoods are represented and represent themselves in contemporary media culture [4,13,17–21]. This analysis pushes back against the dominant understanding of disabled girls and girlhoods, where disability “acts as a trump card”, or “silences other experiences”, such as gender, sexuality, race, and girlhood writ large [18]. I write against the overdetermined ableist, ageist, sexist, and racist discourses that unevenly work to position certain disabled girls as always already vulnerable and in need of rescue, and certain disabled girls as at risk or dangerous and in need of containment. The data in this article come out of and build on a larger research project about the disabled girl's complex role in contemporary media culture and the “grudging recognition” she has been granted, or perhaps not so grudging, as the larger research project reveals [4,22]. I argue that studying the disabled girl and her role in contemporary media culture is necessary work, as it deepens our understanding of the ever-evolving social and political meaning(s) attached to both disability and girlhood.

In exploring how disabled girl handlers become with their service dogs, this article thinks with other scholars writing at the intersection of disability studies and critical animal studies who have articulated with urgency the necessity of wrestling with the “animal question” in disability studies [23–26]. The drive for disability studies and disability activists to distance themselves from the question of the animal or from animality writ large makes sense, as there “has been an urgent need among dehumanized populations [...] to challenge animalization and claim humanity” [24]. However, as Shek-Noble and Jones argue, the “merging” of questions of disability and animal justice can “powerfully recast ableist and anthropocentric imperatives” as well as “enable [a] powerful ontological reclamation of the area between” the categories of human and animal [26]. Instead of proposing an assimilatory and inclusionist turn toward the “Human”, which has always been a violent category of white supremacist and ableist exclusion, this article begins to think through how the service dog/disabled girl handler dyad provides an entry point for thinking about crip ways of being beyond the human. This opens up new avenues for theorizing desire, care, and disability subjectivity.

Before I move to an analysis of disabled girl handlers and their self-representational practices on TikTok, it is first necessary to briefly discuss the dominant framings of the service dog/disabled handler dyad in popular media culture.

2. Popular Media Representations of Service Dogs

Representations of service dogs and their disabled handlers in popular media culture have hit a critical mass: from playful docuseries that showcase the intensive training process, such as *Pick of the Litter*, a 2019 Disney+ original series based on a documentary film of the same name, to fictional representations on television, like the 2019 CW crime drama, *In the Dark*, about Murphy Mason, a blind twenty-something who works at a training school for guide dogs and uses a guide dog named Pretzel.⁷ We could interpret this media saturation as evidence of progress in the roll or march toward a more disability-inclusive world, as one could argue that the media's representational spotlight implicitly affirms the value of these interspecies partnerships. We could also interpret this media saturation as evidence of the public's interest in learning more about disability and the lives and perspectives of disabled people, specifically those who live in partnership with service dogs. Somewhat paradoxically, however, these popular media representations that pepper the evening news, talk shows, film, and television reify a one-dimensional, hyper-sentimentalized account of the service dog and disabled handler. The stories about service dogs and their disabled handlers that most often gain traction in the economy of disability visibility are limited to the heart-wrenching and heartwarming and they center the enduringly normative cast of sympathetic disabled characters: disabled children and veterans. Rather than serve as educational tools for the non-disabled public, most media representations perpetuate the confusion about the rights of disabled handlers and their service animals [27].

Disability studies scholars have recently taken a critical eye to these ubiquitous popular media representations, revealing that they often construct the service dog as an “angel on a leash”, or a savior who is the last resort for folding the disabled person into strictures of normative society [28–30]. Not only does this construction reinforce an ableist, medicalized understanding of disability as merely a target of “intervention and amelioration”, or something that must be cured or fixed at all costs, but it also forwards a myopic understanding of the service dog as solely a tool whose purpose is to rehabilitate the disabled person [31–33]. This construction belies the nuanced experience of interdependency and relationality that many disabled handlers articulate in first-person narratives about their relationships with their service animals (for first-person narratives see: [23,24,34–36]).

Elsewhere, I have discussed how the sentimental affectivity generated in and through popular representations of disabled handlers and their service dogs depoliticizes the relationship between the service dog and the disabled handler and defangs the radical potential of the partnership [30]. What is emphasized in most stories about the disabled handler/service dog dyad is the service dog's undying love for their human. This framing obscures critical perspectives about the discrimination that regularly occurs when disabled handlers traverse the built environment with a service dog. It also capitulates the “good dog trope”, or the idea that dogs have a “natural” proclivity to serve humans and place the needs of humans over their own innate “wild” instincts, specifically “in the service of [their] human family, the representatives of white Western civilization and of human culture” [37]. In effect, this downplays the rigorous training that service dogs must undergo, as well as obscures the fact that service dogs are not economically viable for a large swath of disabled people, as they cost, on average, around USD 25,000–40,000. The mainstream media's uncritical celebration of the service dog as a “new” and superior technology of disability obscures the harm of the ever-expanding privatization and hyper-individualization of care labor for disabled people under neoliberal capitalism⁸ [4]. Specifically in popular media representations of disabled girl handlers and their service dogs, the service dog is lauded for their capacity to heal the broader family unit, fixing the “white-normative space” of the family as the ideal locus of care, as it is the parents' and now service dog's job to provide

care labor for the disabled girl [38]. Ultimately, within these representations, the service dog functions as ablenationalism's "love machine", folding particular disabled girl subjects back into life as "able-disabled" proto-citizens back on track to "grow up" [4].

Within the economy of disability visibility, the self-representations on service dog tok that this article explores next circulate alongside the spectacularly sentimental and on occasion even leverage a similar affectivity (one cannot get away from the heartwarming, "good dog" trope). However, disabled girl handlers on service dog tok forge an alternative valuation of the service dog as a queer/crip companion, and, in effect, push back against the popular media's framing of the service dog as a tool or an exemplary technology of rehabilitation whose sole purpose is to reintegrate the disabled girl back into chrononormative conceptualizations of girlhood and young womanhood.

Claire's relationship with her service dog Rosie, Lexy's with her service dog Lady, and Ava's relationship with her guide dog Cheddar evince a "kinship beyond heteronormativity" [39]. Rather than a tool to aid in the disavowal of disability and return the disabled girl to the normative rails of time, on service dog tok, we see that the service dog is integral to these disabled girl handlers' processes of constructing a disabled girl subjectivity and of claiming crip.

3. Tasking against the Machine: Interdependence on Service Dog Tok

On service dog tok, disabled girl handlers/creators "claim disability" through spotlighting in their videos the "messy, imperfect work-in-progress called interdependence", in effect, moving against the dominant, ableist understanding of girlhood as a temporal stage that neatly, naturally, and linearly unfolds towards the independence of womanhood [6]. Divergent from the ubiquitous construction in popular media as tools of capacitation or 'overcoming' disability, disabled girl handlers position their service dogs as their "companions" in crip/queerness, facilitating their growth "sideways" rather than up [40]. For example, let us return to Ava of @avaandcheddar, whose videos with her guide dog Cheddar articulate a fluid intra-action between the disabled girl handler and the service dog [41]. Ava began posting videos on TikTok in high school in 2021, right after Cheddar became her guide dog. Like the other two disabled girl handlers/creators that this article will later discuss, Ava's account is a mix of videos that educate her followers about guide dogs, including videos that showcase Cheddar's gear and how they navigate the built environment together, informative videos about her disabilities, as well as humorous takes on living in partnership with a guide dog. One unique type of video that Ava posts is Cheddar "POVs", which are videos where the camera is placed on Cheddar's harness. In these videos, viewers follow along from his perspective as he guides Ava. For example, one POV video shows audiences how Cheddar guides Ava through a busy mall, successfully guiding her up an escalator and several sets of stairs. Another video called "High School with a Guide Dog" demonstrates a day in the life of high school for Ava and Cheddar. In a voiceover, Ava narrates how she literally and figuratively navigates high school as a visually impaired student. Viewers watch as Cheddar skillfully guides Ava through the built environment of campus (and in the video, Cheddar also gets to see his best friend, who is also a guide dog). Mindful of accessibility, Ava writes out and includes visual descriptions for each of her videos.

Many of Ava's videos, like the video this article opens with, call attention to the intimately entangled nature of her and Cheddar's being. For example, on 15 November 2021, Ava uploaded a collection of her senior pictures in a video, and, as one would expect, each picture included Cheddar. In some photos, she is walking with Cheddar, in others, she is sitting with Cheddar next to her or under her, and in one she is kneeling on the ground holding Cheddar's paw. The caption reads, "crying in the cliub [sic] rn. . .", alluding to the affectivity of the photographs. One imagines that Ava is not necessarily emotional over her accomplishment of graduating high school, but her tears are generated via the photographic memorialization, one that captures Cheddar by her side. A viewer asks in the

comments, “Okay but the real question is does cheddar get a spot in the year book????” to which Ava responds, “He absolutely does! I believe he’s getting his own Q&A place too!”

Senior photos in the context of the United States are often understood as material memorials; a snapshot in time that celebrates the accomplishment of successfully moving through and beyond childhood into the next phase of young adulthood. Perhaps unwittingly, the genre participates in the shoring up of able-bodiedness/mindedness, as it is tied to a linear developmental progress narrative that privileges independence as the ultimate marker of successful adulthood and an imaginable, desirable future. Writing about the fraught nature of independence, Kelly Fritsch clarifies that the concept “has arisen historically alongside the self-sufficient, rational, property-owning man” [42]. Disabled children (and adults) are often understood as perpetually dependent, but the ultimate goal is independence. The service dog, then, is often positioned as offering the possibility of independence; a tool to fold the disabled girl back into the normative rails of time via the re-capacitation of the disabled girl. Returning to my point about senior photos, the genre emphasizes the individual’s accomplishment, as if any of us move through high school without support or assistance. It is noteworthy, then, that Ava decided to include Cheddar in her photos, shattering the genre’s illusion of sovereignty. Perhaps one could argue her inclusion of Cheddar cripes the genre of senior photos, as it is an act that “spins mainstream representations or practices to reveal able-bodied assumptions and exclusionary effects” [7]. But more to my point, the video produces an understanding of the service dog that exceeds their positioning as merely “tools or equipment” whose sole purpose is to facilitate the disabled person’s independence, and in this specific case, Ava’s developmental and temporal progress, understood via high school graduation [23].

Instead, this article suggests that this video, and many others in Ava’s oeuvre, provokes the viewer to think through how “bodies are produced together” [42]. It is not Ava, in her singularity, who is memorialized in the photographs and in the video, but it is the human–animal assemblage, the disabled girl handler/guide dog dyad, Ava *and* Cheddar. Kelly Fritsch posits that “disabled people are entangled in multiple assemblages”, for example, the “human–machine assemblages of wheelchairs, ventilators, or walkers”; the “disabled–abled assemblages of the disabled person and the care attendant”; and, as evidenced in Ava’s videos, the “human–animal assemblages” of disabled handlers and guide dogs [42]. Conceptualized as a human–animal assemblage, Ava and Cheddar are an “embodied relationality that challenges the normative conception of autonomous beings” [42]. The human–animal assemblage moves us away from conceptualizations of the “normative sovereign able body that poses as a body not ‘impinged upon by others’” [42]. Ava and Cheddar entangled together as “graduating seniors” in the video speaks to a radical interdependency that disabled girl handlers and their service dogs carve out and claim on service dog tok—one not marked by “what you can do for me, but rather, what can we create together” [42].

To further explore this radical interdependency disabled girl handlers and their service dogs carve out and claim on service dog tok, I move to Claire of @rosie.the.sd, a disabled, Asian American young woman. Her TikTok account is a collection of videos about her life with Rosie, her service dog in training, who is a Golden Retriever with a dyed rainbow tail. Similar to Ava, Claire sonically and visually reveals within the oeuvre of her TikTok videos different scales of inter/dependency, often considered “private matters hidden within the family”, provoking viewers to bear witness to the “reality that dependency is a part of all human” and non-human life [43]. Like many disabled girl handlers on TikTok, her videos range from comedic videos about Rosie’s quirks to videos that document her process of training Rosie, who is training to be a psychiatric and medical alert dog. Claire also posts educational videos that dispel myths and stereotypes about service dogs and handlers that have “invisible” or intermittently apparent disabilities. In a couple of particularly informative question-and-answer videos (“Why do I have a Service Dog?” and “All SDs are Valid!”), Claire explains that she has “depression, anxiety, borderline personality disorder, and anorexia”, and “with those diagnoses comes with severe SH addiction (self-harm),

SI (sacroiliac joint dysfunction), and a BFRB (body-focused repetitive behavior) called dermatillomania". She makes a point to remind viewers that "not all disabilities are visible" and that it is "important to remember that not every handler will be as open about their disability, so it is good to be cautious when asking questions like this".

Her most liked video, "She's My Yellow" (2021), foregrounds the vulnerable intimacy of dependency as well as serves a pedagogical purpose, educating viewers about Claire's experience of disability in relation to Rosie's job as a service dog. In the video, Claire and Rosie are walking down an aisle in what appears to be a warehouse club, like Costco or Sam's Club. Claire begins to hyperventilate, and Rosie reacts quickly to begin the process of de-escalation. Rosie jumps on Claire, prompting her to sit on the ground. As she does this, the caption on the video reads "Mom get down". The next caption reads "I do DPT (deep pressure therapy)", and we see Rosie putting her body on top of Claire's body. She begins to lick Claire's face as Claire cries and rocks back and forth. The caption then reads, "No crying. Kisses will make everything better". Claire starts to hit herself on the head, and Rosie responds by blocking, and protecting Claire's head by placing her paws on Claire's shoulders. As this happens, the caption reads, "Oh no don't do that Mom". The video ends with Claire embracing Rosie. "It will be okay" flashes on the screen. The video is intended to be from Rosie's perspective, as she is the one narrating the situation at hand, but the caption underneath the video, "She's my yellow [yellow heart emoji]", is written from Claire's perspective. The "yellow" is, of course, in reference to Rosie's breed, a Golden Retriever (or 'Golden' as Claire colloquially says), and it is also a reference to the background audio, which is a slowed-down snippet of Coldplay's song "Yellow" (2000). The warped and drawn-out chorus mimics the slowing down or unraveling of time that panic attacks induce, making visible and visceral Claire's impairment(s) and her experience of *crip time*, or the "strange temporalities" of disability [5]. The lyrics, "your skin, oh yeah, your skin and bones/turn into something beautiful/and you know, you know I love you so/you know I love you so", serve to represent the Rosie/Claire dyad akin to a loving companionship, as the "love" that Coldplay sings about stands in for the love that Rosie and Claire have for each other. As they embrace in the center of the frame, Rosie and Claire remain still, visually out of time, existing in a "strange temporality" of disability and girlhood. This stillness contrasts with the normative tempo of growing up disabled under neoliberal capitalism, saturated with a feeling of rapidity as it dovetails with the felt rhythms of a curative imaginary that compels its subjects perpetually forward in search of a treatment or cure as a precondition for a future worth living for.

Rather than tend to the common assumption that somehow Rosie miraculously provides her with a "new future"—one that is less disabled—Claire highlights the skilled labor that Rosie performs and emphasizes the reciprocity that grounds their relationship. In a comment, Claire assures her viewers that Rosie "enjoys tasking" and explains that this video was a "simulated episode", as she is "not comfortable posting a real one". Claire and Rosie do these simulations "in public to train [Rosie] for situations where she would need to perform these tasks". She goes on to write that DPT, "stands for deep pressure therapy—kind of how a weighted blanket works. Rosie applies pressure to my body to lower my HR and calm me down". Claire notes that she can tell that Rosie enjoys tasking because she is wagging her tail and emphasizes to the viewer that "service dogs live a full and happy life". As previously noted, Rosie's tail is dyed rainbow colors. She writes in the comment, "although I am apart [sic] of the LGBTQ+ community, it was not dyed to represent it". A separate video, "Why Rosie's Tail is Dyed!" (2021), clarifies that Claire dyes the tail to differentiate Rosie from other "Goldens" to potentially deter dog nappers from stealing Rosie. In highlighting Rosie's vulnerability and dependence on Claire, Claire emphasizes her duty to care *for* Rosie. Their partnership, then, is not only characterized by Rosie's duty to care for Claire. Care, according to literary critic and animal studies scholar Rachel Adams [44], is more than an ethical ideal; it is necessary, intimate labor, "manifested through practice" [45]. Care "is almost always characterized by asymmetries of power, ability, and resources" [44]. In uploading videos that showcase this intimate care labor,

such as the process of dying Rosie's tail, and in taking time to explain how she listens to Rosie via tail wags, Claire reveals how their relationship is grounded in reciprocity, which exceeds the dominant valuation of the service dog as a technology of rehabilitation or capacitation "love machine" [4,32].

One can also find videos on Ava's TikTok that demonstrate her commitment to *caring for* Cheddar, which speaks to the vital acknowledgment that the service dog is also a dependent and vulnerable being, de-centering the conceptualization of the service dog as merely a rehabilitative tool. In a video posted on 21 March 2023, Cheddar plays with a red ball in the park. In the middle of the screen, the text reads, "Did you know service dogs aren't always working?" The text changes to, "I mean, they [sic] are a dog after all! Just one with an incredibly important job. Most service dogs can easily recongize when they're on an off duty. And this is how Cheddar, my service dog spends his time off duty." As the last sentence appears on the screen, Ava says to Cheddar, "are you ready? Go get it!", and throws the ball for Cheddar to chase. The caption for the video reads: "While they also love their jobs, [they] also love to play like any other dog". The audio for the video is a snippet of the song "Mother" by Meghan Trainor (2022). Like Claire's tail dying video, Ava utilizes this video to educate viewers about the care that service dogs need and deserve. Play is care. It gestures toward an ethical responsibility that the disabled handler has toward the service dog, complicating the unidirectional flow of care labor presupposed by the conceptualization of the service dog as a tool of rehabilitation.

What is striking about this video is the background audio that the scene unfolds to: "I am your mother (I am your mother)/you listen to me (you listen to me)/stop all that mansplainin', no one's listening (shh)". Trainor is not literally singing about motherhood in the song—on Instagram, she clarifies that she wrote the song in response to "silly men who said having a baby would end her career"—and it is important to quickly note that Trainor's song was critiqued for its "cheap use of AAVE [African American Vernacular English] slang adopted by the LGBTQ community" [46,47]. Nevertheless, a snippet of the song went viral on TikTok in 2023. Many of the most viewed videos that use the audio are humorous takes on motherhood, interpreting Trainor's lyrics literally. Although Ava is not literally Cheddar's mother; this article suggests that her video and the affectivity generated are in a similar vein to the other humorous TikTok takes on human motherhood. Claire, too, refers to herself as Rosie's mom (or, it is more accurate to say that Claire refers to herself as mom from Rosie's perspective). And, the third disabled girl handler that is discussed in the following section, Lexy, also refers to herself as her service dog Lady's mom.

In these instances, "mother" functions rhetorically and affectively to underscore the responsibility that the disabled girl handler feels toward the service dog. Motherhood is a frame through which the disabled girl handler conceptualizes and speaks to interspecies intimacy—it is a frame that makes sense of their deep love for their service dog, as well as a frame that asserts their duty to protect and care for their service dog. However, I also suggest that claiming "mother" is a playful recognition of the service dog/disabled girl handler's entanglement as a queercrip human–animal assemblage: a strange relation manifest [40]. It is clear that their more-than-human intimacies exceed the heteronormative expectations of a human mother/child relationship and decenter the nuclear family as the pinnacle of care, as it is the dog and the girl who move interdependently together outside the dominant, ableist understanding of human childhood as a "natural" and time-bound phase of vulnerability. In claiming "service dog mom", disabled girl handlers crip motherhood, butting up against an ableist imaginary that positions "disabled mother" as, at best, undesirable, but, at worst, impossible. But, also, the playful conceptualization of mother/child and the more-than-human intimacies that circulate via Ava and Claire's videos chip away at the uncritical celebration of independence as the ultimate goal for disabled people, especially disabled children and young adults. Taking pleasure in caring for each other, on service dog tok, the service dog and disabled girl handler move together as a queercrip human–animal assemblage that refuses the logic of heteronormativity and compulsory able-bodiedness, "imagining other goals for life, for love, [...] and for be-

ing” [48]. Interdependence as represented in Ava and Claire’s videos exceeds the ableist signification of interdependence as loss, specifically as a “loss of privacy and dignity” and, instead, their relationships attest to a fullness of life and love, a crip joy that is uniquely made possible via their mutual entanglement with Cheddar and Rosie [6]. Against the demand to grow up, Ava and Claire grow *with* Cheddar and Rosie.

4. “You Don’t Look Disabled. So You Can’t Be Disabled”: Politicizing Disability on Service Dog Tok

On service dog tok, disabled girl handlers call out the ableist, ageist, sexist, and speciesist structures and logics that seek to delimit their (and their dog’s) mobility, desires, and futures. They politicize disability—or stake a claim in the importance of recognizing that disability is implicated in relations of power—and move against a service dog sentimentalism that serves to smoothly fold the disabled girl handler into the national imaginary as a docile “able-disabled” subject [49]. One way that disabled girl handlers politicize disability on service dog tok is through their use of crip humor. To explore this, let us look at Ava and Cheddar one final time. On 8 June 2023, Ava uploaded a video where she is standing in the center of the frame holding onto Cheddar’s harness and gazing directly at the camera. The text on the video reads: “Interesting accusation [grinning face with sweat bead emoji]”. Then the text, “You don’t look disabled. So you can’t be disabled” appears. Ava glances away from the camera, and as the audio clip, a snippet of Taylor Swift’s “Bejeweled” (2022), transitions from the instrumental portion to Taylor Swift singing “nice”, Ava looks back at the camera, lip-synchs along and gives a thumbs-up. The caption of the video reads, “this one always catches me off guard [grinning face with sweat emoji]”. In the comments, bobsays847 writes, “I have oca1b albinism and no longer have white hair and I often leave my house without my cane and this happens all the time. . .smh”. Another commenter, Avery, adds, “Seriously! Or the one I get the most. ‘You don’t need a service dog because you don’t look disabled.’ . . .cool [thumbs up emoji]”. Two other service dog/handler accounts also comment, expressing that they, too, resonate with Ava.

Similarly, in another video uploaded on 19 March 2022, Ava “explores the depths of her comment sections”. In the talking-head-style video, she explains: “as a visually impaired individual who posts on social media, multiple social media platforms, I get some pretty wonky comments sometimes, whether it’s just people being rude or whether it’s people who genuinely don’t know. Full disclaimer, I’m not trying to shame anybody for asking questions of any kinds. . .” The first comment flashes on the screen: “sometimes I wanna get a mutation just so I can get free money and dogs from the Government too [face exhaling emoji]”. Ava laughs a bit and, shaking her head, says, “I’m going to just start this one off by saying Cheddar is not from the government. . .he’s from an organization called Guide Dogs for the Blind. Shout out to GDB because they follow me on here”. Ava groans and shakes her head and in an exasperated tone says, “Alright next”, to the often asked, “I am super sorry if this is offensive but how do you do the dirty or can you?” One of the next comments she addresses is “you don’t sound or look blind. You don’t need a seeing eye dog”. She responds, “respectfully I wasn’t aware that I was supposed to sound a specific way to be blind”. She laughs and adds, “defying stereotypes I guess”. She follows this with the comment, “u poor thing they should put you down”, to which she whispers, “I had to. . .I had to put this one in here come on!” She ends the video with the comment, “I don’t think she is blind”, to which she says, “thank you for noticing I’m actually faking. Cheddar’s not a real guide dog guys”. In response, Kady writes, “Bro FR you need to teach me how to fake it better [crying face emoji] I gotta get in on this government action too”. SailorGurl writes, “ahh casual eugenics”. DobermanDame writes, “I get this too [pleading face emoji] but luckily my videos haven’t been getting much attention so less hate. The only god [sic] thing ahaha [grinning face with sweat emoji]”.

In these videos, Ava mobilizes crip humor, or an “alternative comic language about the [disabled] body” as both a “shield and weapon” [50,51]. Because of the nonvisible nature of Ava’s disability, when Ava moves through the world—both offline and online—with

Cheddar, Ava and Cheddar both are rendered suspect. As Ellen Samuels writes, “suspicions of fraud often greet declarations of nonvisible identity [...] people with nonvisible disabilities ‘are in a sense forced to pass, and at the same time assumed to be liars’” [52]. Her age and gender, too, render Ava and Cheddar even more suspect, as ageism and sexism collide and position Ava’s claim to disability as dubious. However, TikTok provides a platform for Ava to harness the anger and annoyance that is generated via the ubiquity of the “faking it” allegation. For example, using Taylor Swift’s “Bejeweled” (2022), as an audio meme—or repurposing a sound that has been uploaded by a different user—Ava positions herself and Cheddar as a hyperbolic mirror for the ableist gaze and revels in the absurdity. Similarly, in the second video, she confirms that she and Cheddar are “actually faking”, playing with the stereotype of disabled people as malingerers and service dogs as “fakers”, and, in effect, “asserts power” via the uncomfortable feelings that are potentially generated within able-bodied viewers [50]. In both videos, she transforms her experience of harm, oppression, and ableist microaggression into the raw material for the bit, as well as twists her ableist accusers into the butt of the joke. In the second video especially, Ava’s blasé tone and snarky answers function to “undermine the people who” laugh at her and others in her community [53]. The feelings—shame, annoyance, frustration—and the event of these particular ableist encounters become “grist for the mill” [50]. Not only does Ava “subvert dominant ableist ideologies” via crip humor, but the vulnerable nature of her comedy generates an intimacy between herself and her disabled viewers, which opens the space for other disabled people to be “seen and held in community” [50,54]. Anti-ableist solidarity is generated via the process of mutual recognition, as Ava and her viewers come to realize—together—that their experiences are not isolated incidences or private matters that should be hidden away, but they are a collective experience that is the result of the disabling effects of an ableist society.

Lexy K wields crip humor in her videos, too, as the final disabled girl creator/TikToker that this article analyzes, but the focus of this next section is how her videos politicize disability through a different technique: via broadcasting a mutual becoming with her pit bull-type diabetes alert dog Lady, or “becoming in kind”, as Harlan Weaver [38] would posit. Lexy (@muslimservicedogmom28) is a nineteen-year-old, self-described Muslim “mixed girl”. Much of her account is dedicated to broadcasting her experience as a Type 1 diabetic and her life with Lady. She also posts activist videos that advocate for the liberation of trans and queer people. Apart from her service dog content, some of her most watched videos are those that document her journey coming to identify as a “gay hijabi”. Many of Lexy’s videos document how Lady’s breed as a pit bull-type dog and the invisibility of Lexy’s disabilities (in combination with her age, race, religion, gender, and sexuality) shape their intelligibility as a disabled girl handler and a service dog dyad, or their unintelligibility, as she often narrates. Her videos challenge the dominant, dated human perception of pit bulls and provoke viewers to consider how both disabled handlers and their service dogs are governed by ableist norms. The videos also bear witness to the complicated and often hostile built world that service dog/disabled handler teams must navigate, pushing back against a service dog sentimentalism that seeks to depoliticize disability and the relationship between the disabled handler and their service dog.

In her narrativization of life with Lady, disability is not represented as a single issue, but it is entangled in and moves through other systems of power. One could argue that her videos tell a story of a crip “becoming in kind”, to use Harlan Weaver’s concept that describes an enmeshment of identity and being, both human and non-human [38]. Becoming in kind signals a deep togetherness through relationality, and it suggests a mutual process of “becoming with” [1]. Weaver’s theorization comes out of his experience adopting and living with his pit bull-type dog, Haley [38]. During his time with Haley, Weaver transitioned from “presenting feminine to masculine” [38]. He writes,

“Haley’s presence deeply shaped my world. When my appearance was at its most liminal, when I felt vulnerable as a visibly transgender person, she ensured my safety. Concurrently, my whiteness, queer identity, and middle-class status encouraged other

humans to read Haley as less threatening in my presence. Each of this shaped who the other was" [35].

According to Weaver, becoming in kind offers an ontological frame for thinking through the connections between human-specific categories—race, gender, class, sexuality, and, I would add, disability—and species distinctions [38]. Pairing becoming with kind “connect[s] the ontological stakes of jointly crafted ways of being and unexpected connectivities with identity categories of larger social worlds” [38]. Becoming in kind speaks to a togetherness—a we.

In Lexy’s videos, viewers witness how gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, and religion shape Lady’s experience of breed, species, and role as a service dog. Likewise, they showcase how Lady’s breed, species, and role as a service dog shape Lexy’s experience and being. In one video, she calls Lady her best friend and “lifesaver”, having “saved a bitch without a functioning pancreas like 100+ times”, as the text on the video reads. Despite her proficiency as a service dog, Lady’s pit bull-ness occasionally calls her status into question, as she does not look like the ideal service dog, as pit bull-type dogs are still largely understood as “bad dogs”, as unruly, dangerous, or disobedient. In the 1980s and 1990s, representations of pit bulls in U.S. popular media culture, for example, advanced the image of the pit bull as prone to attack, innately aggressive, and in possession of a “will to kill” [38]. In the 2000s and 2010s, however, perceptions of pit bull-type dogs began to shift from “nature” to “nurture”: from the idea that pit bull-type dogs are innately aggressive, to the idea that their behavior is a matter of how one raises the dog. Despite shifts in perception—largely indebted to animal rescue advocates who campaigned for greater acceptance and understanding of pit bull-type dogs—the pit bull still has a reputation that precedes the “breed”.

Not only do Lexy’s videos challenge this dated, human perception, but they make connections between disability politics and pit bull politics. For example, in a video about how Lady’s breed informs how others interpellate her (or, in this case, do not) as a service dog, Lexy reflects on the “invisibility” of her own disabilities. In the first part of the video, the text reads, “When someone tells me my new service dog is fake because of her breed and that im [sic] not disabled”, and then it transitions to a “gotcha” moment, with the text reading: “then they find out I have Type 1 diabetes, two other autoimmune disorders and various mental illnesses and that she was trained by a renowned service dog organization”. In this case, we see how Lady and Lexy, together, via their visible identities are regularly rendered suspicious, as bodies out of place. Likewise, in a particularly somber video that includes clips of Lady doing innocuous things like eating ice cream, the following text appears: “Mom, why do you advocate so hard for my breed and breeds like mine and strive to make sure we don’t mess up in front of others as a SD team?” The video transitions to Lexy holding Lady and lip-synching to the background audio. The accompanying caption under the video attests to Lexy’s commitment to caring for Lady: “yes, I know they make mistakes but because of her breed the first she slips up in a large public place is where she gets verbally attacked its [sic] my job to protect her [red heart emoji]”. Lexy recognizes how Lady is clearly vulnerable to abuse from ableist accusers, and here, we see again, the disabled girl handler’s commitment to caring for the service dog—“mov[ing] beyond an individualist model of service” to a “recognition of collective care” [35].

These two videos provoke a consideration of the complicated ways in which ableism and speciesism⁹, or the belief that humans are superior to all other non-human animals (on the basis of intelligence, function, and rationality), are inherently intertwined. Here, we see that the service dog is also governed by ableist (and neoliberal) norms of function and productivity, as Lady’s pit bull-ness comes into conflict with the perception of what a “good” service dog looks and acts like [37]. Price argues that attempts to police service dogs inevitably bleed into an attempt to police disabled humans—as potential malingerers [35]. She goes on to note that the criteria used to police boundaries between legitimate/illegitimate such as functionality and intelligence, result in “the nonproductive type of line-drawing’ that inevitably seems to end in declaring a hierarchy of ways

to exist” [35]. It is clear in Lexy’s videos that Lady’s visible identity as a pit bull and Lexy’s visible identity—as a “gay hijabi” young woman whose disability you cannot read on her body—play off each other, and cast doubt on the legitimacy of the disabled girl handler/service dog team. This is similar to how Taylor Johnson, a Black woman who is diabetic, writes about her experience as a service dog handler: it is her “responsibility to ensure that [her dog] Claire is always groomed and is as unobtrusive as possible”, because if she does not, then she and Claire are more often denied access to spaces [55]. And sometimes, even when they are accommodated, it is often at the expense of her “privacy and dignity”, as she often must exaggerate her pain to justify her need for a service dog [55]. She goes on to write that, especially in the racialized context of diabetes, her experience makes it clear that ableism, racism, and capitalism dictate not only how we experience health, but to whom, as a society, we perceive as and consequently deem deserving of support, and quality support.

Lexy’s videos that discuss her and Lady’s experiences being excluded from spaces and being questioned about her disability or Lady’s qualifications, in effect, illustrate and broadcast a politicization of disability as it is linked to other systems of oppression. Disability, as it is experienced in and through her relationship with Lady, is not a private, individual matter, nor is it a “single issue”. We see how Lexy and Lady, together, via their visible identities, are met with skepticism and hostility. This upends the dominant perception of the service dog as always already offering the disabled girl smoother movement in the built world, and uncovers how ableism, white supremacy, and speciesism covertly dictate which bodyminds, human and non-human, are worthy of protection, care, and dignity. Before I move on, it is also important to mention that Lady’s pit bull-ness could also occasionally be protective for Lexy, as a queer young woman who is Muslim and wears a hijab, aiding sometimes in safer movement through a queerphobic and Islamophobic world. Ultimately, laid bare in her videos is the complicated, fluid, and emergent nature of the service dog/disabled girl human–animal assemblage.

5. Conclusion: TikTok’s Viral Cripistemologies of Disabled Girlhood

Similar to what I have discussed elsewhere as “disability vlogging” on YouTube, the immaterial labor of creating, uploading, and broadcasting the disabled girl quotidian on TikTok could be understood as a practice of archiving knowledge and feeling [4]. Ava, Claire, and Lexy’s cripistemological insight, or their knowledge and feelings gleaned from the “critical, social, personal” and affective position of disabled girlhood, and more specifically, the knowledge gleaned from their relationship with and to their service dog, offers new ways to think about care, disability, and community [56]. As this article has explored, disabled girl handlers on service dog tok resist the rigid and limiting understanding of a service dog as a “tool” of rehabilitation whose job it is to smoothly assimilate the disabled girl back into ableist and chrononormative understandings of disabled girlhood. Instead, disabled girl handlers offer a nuanced and rich account of their lives with their service dogs. Their videos archive a becoming with that privileges a reciprocal understanding of care and a nuanced understanding of ableism. Ultimately, this article proposes that disabled girl handlers crip girlhood on service dog tok, articulating a desire to grow with their service dogs, rather than up.

However, unlike disabled girl creators on YouTube and Instagram who engage in self-representational practices and broadcast the disabled girl quotidian via “prolonged communicative intimacies”, on TikTok “the nature of fame and virality has shifted” [57]. TikTok researcher Crystal Abidin reveals that most users on TikTok “strive to have individual posts accumulate engagement”, rather than maintain a coherent persona or singular style [57]. Because of the platform’s affordances and norms—most specifically, the algorithmically driven ‘For You Page’—creators are compelled to produce videos that utilize a range of various styles, hashtags, audio memes, and filters. They are chasing the “golden ticket” to the For You Page, as Abidin writes, in order to accumulate viewers or followers [57]. Furthermore, unlike YouTube and Instagram—both platforms that are primarily visually

driven—audio drives TikTok. We see all of this play out in the videos that this article analyzes. For example, in the opening video, Ava’s video engages with the viral audio clip of Father John Misty’s “Real Love Baby”. If one were to click the audio, thousands of videos that utilize that same snippet and the same video format—photographs of complementary material objects—would pop up.

It is clear that because of the particular norms and affordances of TikTok, for example, the privileging of sound over image and the algorithmically driven For You Page, the contours of digital labor have shifted for disabled creators. Disabled influencers, or “crip-fluencers”, who generate a self-brand out of their disability subjectivity and monetize their flows of content must utilize different techniques to build a following and subsequent brand partnerships [4]. Building disability community, too, has shifted due to the more fragmented nature of TikTok. The community of service dog tok feels more like a web cast out at sea: mobile, shifting, yet still tenuously connected. Future research in disability media studies must think through how the affordances and norms of TikTok inform not only how disability community is cultivated, but also how archives of disability knowledge and feeling are built and circulated. Because there have been reports of shadow banning disabled creators—is there crip algorithmic lore that disabled creators circulate? How are disabled creators’ self-representational practices and their video production decisions impacted by their algorithmic “gut feelings” [57]? It is also necessary for scholars to think more critically about user engagement. How do users encounter disability content? How do disability intimate publics function differently in the comment sections of TikTok? And, lastly, how does the short-form nature of TikTok inform how disability subjectivity is produced via the platform? What about how it is monetized? Ava, Claire, and Lexy *become* disabled via their relationships with Cheddar, Rosie, and Lady, but how do their TikTok accounts, specifically, function as technologies of disability subjectivity? How do their digital disability becomings take on a different shape?

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Notes

¹ Launched in 2018 to a global market, TikTok is the sister app of Douyin, the Chinese company ByteDance’s short-form video app. Unlike “long-form” video-sharing platform YouTube, TikTok videos range from fifteen seconds up to ten minutes, and video creation is largely based on snippets of audio, most often popular songs. Many characterize TikTok as the “most addicting scrolling experience on the internet” because of its sophisticated algorithm [2].

² Some of the creators that I discuss in this article are over the age of 18 at the time of writing. Although many consider girlhood to be a life stage that occurs up until one becomes a legal adult, I am not so rigid in my conceptualization. How we understand girlhood, like disability, changes over time. It is historically, contextually, and geographically specific. For the purposes of this article, I understand girlhood as a bio-social construction, an elastic life stage, a feeling, and a capacious category of analysis. I see “girl”, then, as a productive lens for understanding and analyzing Ava, Claire, and Lexy’s experience of disability and social media at the intersection of gender and age. Like girlhood, I do not characterize disability in a definitive manner. My use of crip gestures toward this commitment, as I understand the meanings of disability and ability as shifting, contested, and open to transformation. Disability is not necessarily a self-evident category, but instead, I imagine it as more akin to an affiliation, a mode of experience, and a political identity. I am inspired by Alison Kafer’s use of Joan W. Scott’s notion of “collective affinity” to describe disability, as “play[ing] on the identifications that have been attributed to individuals by their societies, and that have served to exclude them or subordinate them” [5].

³ A handler is a disabled person that a service animal assists.

⁴ This article does not attempt to paint an exhaustive picture of disabled girl handlers on TikTok and all the various ways in which they narrativize their lives with their service dogs. Rather, the goal of this article is to zoom in on and explore a few notable examples. The videos that I decided to analyze were, in some ways, determined with the help of my personal algorithm. I searched “service dog”, “disabled girl handler”, and “service dog handler” on TikTok. This led me to @rosie.the.sd, whose

video, “She’s My Yellow”, was the top “liked” video on the search page at the time of this research. Her account then led me to @servicedogmom28 and @avaandcheddar, whose videos feature similar themes—e.g., the politicization of disability, as well as the desire for interdependence and performance of reciprocal care.

5 Going “viral” refers to a phenomenon wherein content on the internet, most often social media posts, spreads quickly to other online users or platforms (most often exponentially gaining “likes” or “shares” or “views” in a very short period of time).

6 Neoliberalism is a specific configuration of governance characterized by the application and privileging of free-market logic to the domain of life itself, the deregulation of corporate and financial sectors, the privatization of land and resources, the defunding of public and social services and supports, and accumulation by dispossession, or the centralization of wealth and power for the few through the government’s process of dispossessing the public of collectively held spaces [10,11]. Neoliberalism also extends to the organization of subjectivity. The idealized subject of neoliberalism is entrepreneurial, self-sufficient, self-optimizing, and responsible.

7 Other notable films and television series about service dogs: *Through a Dog’s Eyes* (2010); *Max* (2015); *SEAL Dog* (2015); *The Buddy System* (2016); *Adele and Everything After* (2017); *Megan Leavy* (2017); *Rescue Dog to Super Dog* (2017); *To Be of Service* (2019); *The Greatest Bond* (2020); *A Dog’s Service* (2020).

8 For the purposes of this article, I define neoliberal capitalism as a phase of twenty-first-century capitalism.

9 It is important to note that there are debates about the utility of “speciesism” as a category of analysis. It can easily erase ontological debates about racialized populations, white supremacy, and the status of the “Human”. Speciesism was popularized by philosopher Peter Singer, who is widely critiqued for his ableism.

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