

Summer of 2012: Paralympic Legacy and the Welfare Benefit Scandal

Written by Liz Crow

Published in 2015 in *Review of Disability Studies*, 10 (3 &4).

Abstract: Through the summer of 2012, two sets of images dominated the British press: welfare benefits scrounger and Paralympic superhuman. Through one claimant's traversal of the benefits system and against the heady backdrop of the Games, this narrative inquiry examines the profound and tangible consequences of these images, whilst offering hope for an abiding legacy that holds consequences for public perception of disability and the lives of disabled people.

Introduction

In this paper, I contrast the images of welfare benefits scrounger and Paralympic superhuman and describe their recurring themes, discussing the meaning each brings to the other and examining their shaping of perceptions of disability. I trace their impact through my personal traversal of the benefits system against a heady backdrop of the Games. Finally, I explore the deeper ramifications these images hold for us all.

Warm Up

In the summer of 2012, the British press was preoccupied with two contrasting sets of images of disabled people. The first consisted of widespread images of disability benefits claimants, positioned within a context of comprehensive benefits reform and a massive 30% cut from the national disability benefits budget (Edwards, 2012).

Two interwoven strands rapidly emerged: fraudster and scrounger. The first portrays non-disabled people defrauding the state via non-existent impairment. They appear in family snapshots and surveillance video carrying out activities likely precluded by the alleged impairment: playing golf, digging gardens, and riding on a rollercoaster.

Scrounger reporting, in contrast, focuses on “workshy” disabled people who “languish” on benefits in preference to work, shifting the gaze from non-disabled fraudster to disabled parasite. Specific offences are replaced by generalized reporting, while amorphous photographs modeled by actors – stock images of normative bodies lain on sofas, television remotes in hand – portray scrounging as another version of fraud. Different types of benefit are conflated: whilst Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) is for those deemed “unfit” for work, all disabled people, employed or not, may claim Disability Living Allowance (DLA) as a contribution towards impairment and disability costs. In this new rhetoric, however, all claimants are cast as scrounger.

Negative coverage prompts hardening of public attitudes with an unprecedented two-thirds of the population believing benefits are so generous that they discourage job-seeking (Goulden, 2012). Public estimates of fraud range from 50% to 70% (Briant, Watson & Philo, 2011), as much as 230 times the Department for Work and Pension’s figure of 0.3% (DWP, 2011).

Reporting is a narrative of criminality and moral bankruptcy. With government support (Newton Dunn, 2012), *The Sun* launches a “crusade” to “Beat the Cheat,” providing a telephone line for readers to report on neighbors (Talsania, 2012). In the five-years to 2010/11, *Daily Mail* coverage of “cheats” increases five-fold (Briant, Watson and Philo, 2011). Across the press, articles portraying disabled people as an economic “burden” multiply, and pejorative language (skiver, cheat, feckless) rises (Briant, Watson & Philo, 2011). The overriding message is uncritical support for welfare reform, in an account that portrays fraud as rampant and unites taxpayers against a national threat.

The character of non-disabled fraudster and disabled scrounger are equally under suspicion, but neighborly surveillance is not experienced equally. The fraudster has no identifiable impairment, so suspicion falls on those who do: was the wheelchair-user seen walking? Did the person with the white stick cross the road unaided? Was the ill neighbor seen out shopping (Begg, 2012)? A single case of fraud is implied to incriminate all disabled people; those whose impairments are visible are in the spotlight.

Disabled people feel the press message as a threat (Disability Rights UK, 2012). Added to anxiety about benefits reform, is surveillance, misinterpretation, disenfranchisement and hostility (de Wolfe, 2012) and a style of reporting that defames a community. At its extreme, an interview with the Minister for the DWP suggests disabled people are responsible for the entire recession (Newton Dunn, 2010).

In four years of financial crisis, I have watched figures for disability hate crime climb. By summer 2012, they have doubled and over half of disabled people have experienced hostility, aggression or violence from a stranger (ComRes, 2011). The scrounger rhetoric is a key player (Briant, Watson and Philo, 2011). Hate crime researcher, Katharine Quarmby, writes: "If you have a group that is blamed for economic downturn, terrible things can happen to them" (Riley-Smith, 2012).

Some seek to quell hostility through a counter image: disabled person as victim. In online newspaper comments pages, they reprise a contemporary version of traditional charity imagery, portraying disabled people as defenseless and pitiable. Whilst it might lift immediate public opprobrium, to cast disabled people as vulnerable when hate crime is rising, plays a dangerous game.

The second image set emerges in the run up to London 2012 and could scarcely contrast more. The largest Paralympics ever, the most accessible and best attended in its 64 years (Topping, 2012), is promoted and reported on an unprecedented scale - over 500 broadcast hours and

the most widely reported print news (Journalisted, 2012). It contrasts starkly with reporting on benefits - a celebratory reporting of disability of exceptional magnitude.

As official broadcaster, and in keeping with government Paralympic legacy, Channel Four's mission is to "[t]ransform the perception of disabled people in society" (ODI, 2011, p. 4). Matching the Paralympic motto, "empowerment, inspiration, achievement", in a shift from its rehabilitative roots to world-class athleticism, the International Paralympic Committee aims to use sport to contribute to "a better world for all people with a disability" (IPC, 2003, p.1).

Media coverage launches through an advertising campaign. "Meet the superhumans" becomes a Paralympic mantra, echoed across all media and emblazoned across a larger-than-life glossy photograph of athletes, sleek and streamlined: swimmer, cyclist, runner, and wheelchair rugby player. Looking the viewer in the eye, they challenge them to dare to look back, dare to pity.

Once the Games are underway, a torrent of images appears of disabled people's endurance and athleticism, impairment on view as never before, in a matter-of-factness of visibility. Hesitant early reporting becomes increasingly assured, in an awed weave of sporting triumph and individual "overcoming". As medal counts rise, disabled athletes are fêted as heroes.

Topping the bill are back stories of shark bite, railway tracks, terrorism and war (Lusher, 2012; Lydall, 2012). The "hierarchy of impairment" is reenacted. Foremost are amputees with high technology prostheses. For spectators, the transformative powers of technology mark the apotheosis of superhuman.

Non-disabled audiences are initially absorbed by the athletes' impairments, but notice their focus shift to sheer athleticism (BBC News, 2012). The press comments on Ellie Simmonds, and other athletes that "She ceased to be a disabled person. She was simply a champion swimmer" (Phillips, 2012, para.3). In a saturation of images, Games organizers and press predict these are images to change attitudes forever (Moreton, 2012).

At the closing ceremony, the Games are heralded as having “lifted the cloud of limitation” (Coe, 2012 in Collins 2012, para.1). The press ponders how extraordinary it is what, with determination, disabled people can do (Phillips 2012). The Paralympics spotlights a group who are at last “acceptable” to broader society. For most disabled people, it is an image to cleave to.

Lighting the Cauldron

The two image sets – inspirational Paralympian and immoral claimant – could hardly be more different, yet they have much in common. Replicating an ancient binary, they are a tale of extremes, of overcoming and inspiring versus flawed, burdensome and tragic.

Except for their intensity, their core messages would be merely a modernization of historic themes. However, unprecedented density and compressed timescales take them to new influence. In isolation, Paralympic coverage is an extraordinarily affirmative departure from traditional representations, yet its image borders are permeable. For most Paralympians are also claimants, whose DLA defrays costs of impairment and discrimination (while some also receive out-of-work ESA). That benefits are crucial to their athletic aspirations (Toynbee 2012), is almost entirely absent from the discourse of either image. Where Paralympians are virtuous through implied self-sufficiency, other disabled people are absorbed into the scrounger rhetoric.

Despite polarization, both images tell a similar story: of individuals with impairments separate from social context. Whether by Paralympic success or claimant immorality, the individual is portrayed as soaring or plummeting through innate will.

In ignoring social influences – from discrimination and poverty to elite training and sustained investment – the press glorifies those who overcome disabling barriers (Hevey, 1992, 87), and

admonishes the rest. The claimants' reflected shame raises the athletes' pedestal higher, each image reinforcing the other.

Disabled people visiting Olympic Park refer to the "Paralympic bubble" (Gentleman, 2012, title), with access and inclusion as we have never known before. Press reporting places the athletes in that same bubble, reassuring non-disabled audiences that "see... disability isn't so bad... Those athletes seem to be getting on just fine" (Shakespeare, 2012, para.3). Coverage supports an illusion that any disabled person who excels ceases to be a disabled person at all. To be disabled, as those eligible for disability benefits must be, is to preclude excellence, whilst, for athletes, it is as though impairment and disability have ceased to be.

Since the meaning of images is influenced by the context in which they are viewed (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p.46), it shifts for different audiences. What it is to be disabled is not fixed, and Paralympic and benefits coverage changes according to audience concerns. Hence, the scrounger rhetoric meets approval from a population fearing that fraud endangers national interests, but threatens those at risk of false accusation. For many, the Paralympics is a positive new viewing of disability, even as it undermines disabled people who cannot conform to its exacting standards.

Through Paralympian, fraudster and scrounger, or the counter depiction of victim, the images center on individuals as source and solution for barriers. With serious consequences for disabled people's real lives, it is a barrage of images that reflects and bolsters government policy on austerity cuts and benefits reform.

As benefits reform pushes forward, it becomes clear that changes incorporate the most serious flaws of the image sets. The classification system that assesses entitlement to support also situates disabled people outside social context. Impairment is taken to indicate employability, without reference to discrimination, support or job availability. Classification has always been core to the welfare state, but this shift isolates claimants fully from their social context.

The Paralympics system is administratively separate, whilst overlapping in philosophy, with both systems built upon a common image that matches Paralympic representation.

Quantifiable biomechanical descriptors, such as strength, flexibility and balance, which are used to allocate athletes fairly to competition, are also used to determine claimants' eligibility for financial assistance (Tweedy & Burke, 2009, DWP 2012b).

For the Paralympians, the measures fit, broadly, the physicality of the athletes, whose impairments are generally quantifiable (amputations, visual impairment, restricted growth, etc.) and who are being measured for quantifiable activity (power, endurance, etc.). Claimants, however, with typically more complex, hard-to-quantify impairments (chronic, fluctuating and life-limiting conditions) (DWP, 2012a)), struggle to fit criteria, which also fail to accommodate the range of generalized employment tasks. In basing benefits classification on an erroneous image of disability, it becomes a system unfit for purpose.

For those assessed, it is vital to match the assessor's "picture in the mind" of disability. If the prevailing image does not represent us as disabled people then we fall through the net. Classification influences athletes' medal chances, whilst for claimants, it determines chances in life. The claimant deemed "fit for work" is not only without support, but subjected by the press to the charge of scrounger.

The "bubble" gives a distorted, simplistic view of impairment. Paralympians and claimants are viewed as bodily and socially equivalent, differences in outcome reduced to individual strengths and choices. In vastly different circumstances, the Paralympian is applauded, whilst the claimant is excoriated.

The two sets of images peddle a two-dimensional representation. Since the human mind responds to "metaphorically grounded" meaning (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), their over-simplification converts to a symbol of what it is to be disabled. Ceasing to focus on the

individuals portrayed - “this” claimant or “this” athlete - they become a commentary on all disabled people. Lodging in the mind, they become “the heroic Paralympian...and the burdensome gimp” (Peers, 2009, p.654), in a shorthand of values and judgment.

For disabled people, public identities become limited to scrounger and fraud, victim or hero. Somewhere between, in the invisible gulf, is the space that most disabled people inhabit.

Since most of the population claims to have little contact with disabled people (ComRes, 2010), the invisible majority remains unseen. Non-disabled people’s primary source of meaning is the cultural media (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999), which teaches culturally acceptable ways of making sense of surroundings (Holtzman, 2000). In the absence of compelling, sustained alternatives, an under-informed audience takes its lead from the dominant rhetoric.

Paralympics and benefits imagery holds the power to create a collective imagining of what a disabled person might be.

In casting disabled people as “other,” the images set disabled people apart (Stanton, 1996). Repeated references to “we” the taxpayer, “they” the claimant, “they” the superhumans, “we” the ordinary mortals, drive a wedge between disabled people and the rest.

The power of images is well known from another more sinister era. Paralympic imagery carries a trace of *Olympia*, Riefenstahl’s 1936 Berlin Olympics film, with its commanding aesthetic of an idealized physical type (Viggiano 2011). Simultaneously, National Socialist Party images portrayed disabled people as economic burden, readying the citizenry for a program of mass-murder that decimated the population of disabled people (Crow, 2010). Contemporary benefits coverage is charged with this same discourse. For National Socialists, the body’s state mirrors that of the mind (Mosse, 1996). Just as with Paralympic and benefits images, the body comes to indicate an individual’s moral character.

Consistently presenting disabled people as other than we are, these images leave us caught in the invisible gulf, yet simultaneously exposed to their crossfire. Any group made symbolically more alien, less able to conform, is made vulnerable to hostility and hate. In a public interrogation of who is to blame for the cuts, this is the most dangerous of places to be.

Sitting in the Games, I want to enjoy them wholeheartedly, to revel in the visibility of my community, the absolute naturalness of seeing them there, at home in the public wearing of their bodies. Entering the aquatics center through functional spaces, I pass through doors which open to light and height and blue. A third up from the pool, with dizzying tiers climbing sharp behind me, I am placed for the perfect view, the water a sheet of glass - empty, enticing, waiting.

Let the Games Begin

The brown envelopes, every time, set my heart thudding, announcing I must make public all that is most private, to be raked over by bureaucrats with images in their minds of people like me. It is the brown envelopes that spill news that my impairment of years, and all discrimination with it, has disappeared. Suddenly, through a peculiar logic of classification, I am found well enough to prepare for paid work I will never do. It is the same brown envelopes that herald months of waiting, of solicitors, evidence and tribunals, for a crime that isn't mine. I feel I have the wrong impairment, but it is the system that is broken.

In the newspapers, I am feckless, cheating, scrounging, and languishing. You would never know that benefits are the safety net that anyone who has ever worked for money has already paid towards. Entitlement is forgotten and an assumption of guilt built into the system. I read that we all know someone who cheats in a world I do not recognize. But when *The Sun* launches its "Beat the Cheat" hotline, provoking neighbor to report on neighbor, I make sure to close the blinds before I walk across the room.

I should perhaps turn my fury to the fraudsters, except that, when my own claim fails, the newspapers have primed the public to believe that I am one too. The fraudsters are not the only ones who tell tales. Statistics tell that 299 disabled people on ESA are reassessed for every case of fraud (DWP, 2011). I have a creeping sense that we are not just dispensable, but too costly, taking up space that belongs to others. We have been dubbed “useless eaters” before, in another more lethal era.

At the supermarket, I notice I am holding myself differently - alert, vigilant. I sit taller and smile wider at strangers because now it seems safer. I act almost Paralympian, even as I am not, even as it betrays others who cannot do the same, even as I return home to recover energy I could never afford to waste. I go out even less, become aware of lying low in self-imposed, protective invisibility.

It is the news of people dying that steals my breath, people found “fit for work” and dying, wronged, people who short-circuit the process in the most final and desperate way. It is my ten-year old, filled with life and justice, who gets it right. “It’s like the witches,” she says, well enough to survive the assessment and you cannot truly be disabled; to prove you are, surely you must die in the process. It is true that I am now too ill to be ill.

Ministers tweak the system to assuage difficult questions, and send guidelines to job centre staff on how to deal with suicide threats (Domokos, 2011), while the death toll rises. We have become canaries down the mines, revealing a system that has become too toxic. As the Paralympics draws closer, I feel I shall implode.

The Opening Ceremony broadcasts to a billion-figure audience, and I recline upon my sofa to draft a defense for my forthcoming tribunal. In the background, disabled artists perform a high wire act.

The Games begin and every political agenda collides, as if a collective holding of breath is all at once released in a perfect storm.

If there is a single symbol of the storm, it is Atos, the multinational company contracted by the government's Department of Work and Pensions to apply this new process of assessment. In "doing the dirty work of the DWP", Atos becomes both architect and symbol of welfare reform, labeled as collaborators in this war on disabled people. As a primary sponsor of the Games, their logo is brazen on lanyards around the neck of every athlete. "It makes sense," says comedian Mark Steel, "in the way that if you had a gay Olympics, you'd get it sponsored by the Pope" (Steel, 2012, para.1). The Paralympic authorities defend their excellent relationship with their sponsors and the athletes, with a few audacious exceptions, hold their contractual silence.

Athletes are fêted as heroes, celebrated for determination and resilience. The press chorus' approval, whilst the tabloids reaffirm a conviction that the rest are cheats and scroungers, shouting the news with energy revitalized. The countering message of victim sends chills down my spine. Each and every image makes failure a part of the deal. The athletes' own benefits assessments are officially postponed until after the Games and I wonder what awaits them, out of uniform and back to looking like the rest of us. Yet, still, surveying all the options, I yearn to be a Paralympian. If they are superhumans, then where does that leave the rest of us? I find I have prosthesis envy.

Protesters take to streets and keyboards with terrier determination. The newspapers wonder provocatively that they can be well enough to protest and yet ill enough to claim, never grasping they are fighting for their lives. On comments pages, on Facebook and in tweets, there is mounting turbulence, a people's despair cloaked in fury that spits and spews onto the screen. It is a two-week "window" to create another image that can communicate, galvanize, and give courage.

Disabled People Against the Cuts takes its “Closing Atos Ceremony” to the DWP (DPAC, 2012), hundreds of people filling the pavements outside with chants and banners, solidarity and resolve, in images that “talk back” (Garland-Thomson, 2009, 193) to those who would do us harm. Watching webcam footage, I revel in the visibility of my community, in the public wearing of their bodies and their rage. I know my heroes.

Inside Olympic Park, spectator-activists cover up Atos logos and deface the occasional lanyard (Pring, 2012). I take my own small protest to the swimming, wearing a black armband of mourning telling that “Atos Kills.” Deep inside, I long to stretch out in the Olympic blue of water.

In a ratings bid, the government adopts the Paralympics; it is a popularity contest for us all. In shaking a hand, presenting a medal, with a well-placed volley at those who disappoint, they confirm in the minds of many that there are those who inspire and others who scrounge. But I rally at the Chancellor’s appearance, presenting a medal to the accompaniment of boos, a crowded stadium united in an aural Mexican wave (Channel 4, 2012). “Why did 80,000 people boo George Osborne? Because they couldn’t fit any more in the stadium.” That night, it is my sweetest sleep in months.

On the street, there is a sea of change. My electric trike draws admiration as never before. Strangers ask what sport I do, but faces fall as I am found wanting, though there’s no more likelihood of my being a Hannah Cockcroft or a Richard Whitehead than there is of these ill-equipped strangers becoming Jessica Ennis or Mo Farah. A man wants to know why my chair is battery-powered when there are “much worse” who push themselves; am I lazy or what?

Back home, in the bosom of my family, watching the Games on television, we play impairment lotto. Any athlete spotted overplaying the inspirational card, we strike instantly and for life from all benefits.

The protests continue nationwide with phone jamming and banners unfurled. A coffin filled with messages is delivered to Atos; each note describes a disabled person's experience at the hands of Atos assessors, in a memorial to those who have died (The Void, 2012). And, at last, after more than two years of lobbying, we see the first critical shift in the press.

And perhaps this is the favor the Paralympics – even Atos – have done. Perhaps this is where perceptions can be “transformed,” for they have given us a hook to lever a different kind of attention from the press.

Deep in the pages of *The Guardian* and *Independent*, even occasionally a lone stalwart in the *Daily Mail*, there begins another reporting. A small voice next to the tabloid screech, but a voice that might be heard, might start to turn a tide. Never yet shouting from the front page, nonetheless a door has opened to a torrent: the whistleblower pressured to misclassify claimants as fit for work (Brown, 2012), the vast numbers of decisions overturned at tribunal (HC Deb 4 September 2012. c17WH), the Atos doctors and nurses reported for professional misconduct (Lakhani, 2012), the exposure of targets for removing people from disability benefits (Long, 2012), the 90,000 accessible vehicles forecast to be repossessed (Toynbee, 2012), the government's threatened sanctions for disabled people who cannot comply with work-related instructions (Malik, 2012), and the 43% deemed too well for disability benefits, but too ill for work, vanishing from the records (Clarke, 2012), the prolonged stress, needless deaths and suicides (Sommerlad 2012, Wachman & Wright 2012). An economist confirms disabled people are “the hardest hit” (Edwards, 2012). Truly we are collateral damage in this war of cuts.

On an online forum, I read of the ex-con, guilty of embezzlement, offering to represent claimants at tribunal for a one-off payment (Toolbox, 2011), but he's scarcely more than a speck in the layers of deception.

I stumble upon the name of Unum, the US insurance company, advising the DWP in the design of its benefits assessment system. I read of their consultative role through successive British governments (Private Eye, 2011), simultaneous with their labeling as an “outlaw company” in the United States, guilty of denying multiple thousands of disability insurance claims (Mundy, 2011, para.4). I read of their claims-denial quotas and instructions to falsify medical assessment records (Jolly, 2012a). I read of the role of Atos in devising the assessment system, of the Diploma in Disability Assessment Medicine they run for healthcare workers subsequently deemed qualified to assess claimants (FOM, 2012). I learn first-hand of the way these assessors “disappear” claimants’ impairments in a carbon copy of the process that saw Unum prosecuted (Kohn, 2009). I read that Unum’s medical officer moved post to become chief medical officer at Atos (Private Eye, 2011), and of Cardiff University’s Centre for Psychosocial and Disability Research, run with funds from Unum and a head from the DWP (Jolly 2012a). I see how they have rewritten the bio-psychosocial model for the purposes of benefits reform, privileging psychological factors to besmirch sick and disabled people as trapped in unemployment by their own lack of motivation (Jolly 2012b), all the while intoning that “work will set you free” (Jolly 2012a, para.1).

I read more than is good for me and layers of globalized interests and corruption, of greed and human dispensability, conspire in a weight of obscenity which dizzies down to a picture of me, pen in hand, as I place careful words on paper in defense of my future. Meanwhile, the government announces it has hardly begun on its plans for benefits reform. I quake in my boots at what lies ahead. In *The Washington Post*, a photograph (Morenatti, 2012) shows a protester sobbing, distress etched upon his face. Back home, I shed my own dark tears.

As I hurtle towards my tribunal, I am reduced to exposing my scars for public viewing. In this brave new world of benefit reforms, the assessment sets out to demonstrate what we can do (Grayling, 2011). Surely, it is born of a Paralympic ethos. But when my impairment is made to vanish, my appeal relies upon my cataloguing and parading all that I cannot. With no facility for cataloguing the effects of discrimination, I can only present myself as “unfit.”

The cost, the trauma, the reason people are killing themselves, is beyond assessments, beyond money, beyond tribunals; the cost is in what they represent. For who says I cannot work? It is only true that I cannot in this narrowed way of doing it. In a system where work is required to be consistent, predictable, regular and sustained, then I cannot work, which is not the same as saying I am unfit for work. It is that there is no room for my way of working, of contributing. In a system that holds work as the indicator of a person's worth, then I am, by default, of no worth. How did value come to be measured in such restrictive terms? Do I only contribute when I earn? Why do I not earn when I contribute? It is a stripping of self.

I have no option but to fight for benefits, for myself and others. But this is short term survival, clinging to the ghosts of autonomy, nothing more; it challenges nothing, leaves everything that is wrong untouched. Over the course of decades, I have built a life despite, to spite, all illness and discrimination. Finer than gossamer, it allows me to be me. Now, that meticulously crafted, oh-so-fragile security is trampled and my finite health is to be spent defending the threads that remain.

And in that moment before I hit rock bottom, before there can be no turning back, I realize how I am caught. To survive, I must deny all that I am, all that I have done, all that I might be. In order to get the financial support I need, I must fight to be written off in a system that is broken. This is the unspoken pact.

So now I know.

I almost lost myself the other day, but I am back, battered and exhausted, and ready to answer back.

Legacy

The Paralympics have “lifted the cloud of limitation,” says London 2012 Chair Lord Coe (Collins, 2012 para.1). I wonder next morning how other disabled people feel waking to grey skies.

In the immediate aftermath of the storm is a sense of hiatus. The athletes return to homecoming parades, a brief hush descends upon the political machine, and activists give way to exhaustion for a while. It is time to take stock.

The first ever “Legacy Games” (DCMS, 2012, p. 8) has been a collision of images. A small glimmer for those who can match the abiding images of the Games, they threaten a heavy backlash for the rest. And as the Paralympic fanfare ebbs away, the benefits juggernaut roars on.

Legacy is a mercurial thing that sometimes must divert from its intended path. The Paralympics could have provided a platform for athletes and activists to communicate a more truthful representation of contemporary disabled people’s lives (Purdue & Howe, 2011). In the absence of that, I wonder if we can seize the opening to shape an alternative of our own.

In this moment, it is benefits reform that many of us must fight. By sheer necessity, by principle and solidarity, we support each other in a battle for survival, which depends, not on evidencing need, but on fulfilling “a picture in the mind.”

It is a picture nourished and reinforced by a “long campaign of misinformation,” uncorrected and indeed, fed, by government briefings that have fuelled hostility (Quarmby, 2012, para.7).

Individual benefits victories and grudging policy concessions can be no more than a short term legacy, or a reaction to crisis. Austerity, in its justification of welfare cuts, reporting bias, and of bending ourselves to fit, is a shield which diverts from deeper questioning of what lies beneath.

Immersed within the name-calling of superhuman/fraudster/scrounger/victim, lies an unease of greater magnitude, a resounding message of the social value placed upon disabled people. The images, in their polarization, are symbols not only of mythic disability, but of what we as a society value and abhor. As emblem, the Paralympic superhuman has found its converse: disabled person as subhuman.

These are the values built into this benefits reform, in its assault upon disabled people's futures and its relentless advance even as the deaths accumulate. It is these values that greet reform with widespread public support and an accompanying rise in hate. It is the same values behind other justifications: segregated education and threats to independent living, selective fetal screening for impairment and the rush to legal rights for assisted suicide.

It is a set of values that connects our every campaign, so to make effective change on one issue requires addressing them all. They are values rooted in history, yet experienced by contemporary disabled people as daily threats. Beneath the benefits rhetoric, is a challenge of "our right to inhabit this planet, our right to exist" (Bashall, 2012, 1h33').

Simply to create alternative images – of "ordinary" disabled people between the extremes, who work and play, run homes, raise children, etc – is not enough. They are a partial view, of disabled people able to conform, but allowed to continue, untouched, the values that confine those in the invisible gulf.

Instead we need counter representations from an agenda of our own. We need to reverse the spotlight, "naming and shaming" those who do us harm, and telling a different story that shows what those who cannot conform can be in a system that would treasure diversity. It is not that people like us do not exist, but that we do not appear in the public gaze. To challenge the prevailing images through "visual activism" (Garland-Thomson, 2009, p. 193) is to produce images from out of the invisible gulf.

But we need to look deeper still. For behind the notion of disabled people as less, is a layer of values that reveres economic productivity and self-sufficiency. For those who do not, or cannot conform, their social value is diminished. What do these values mean for people kept from the workforce by discrimination? Or who cannot work because notions of work are so constrained? Or who are too ill to contribute in any endorsed way? We are left with no representation capable of reflecting dignity back to ourselves or demonstrating that we are of worth.

The image sets, and the structures built in their likeness, tell us little about disabled people and more about their non-disabled producers. They comment on the misinterpretation of what it is to be disabled and the function that disability serves within a society. They combine in a metaphor for hope and warning - the Paralympians symbolizing a “triumph of the will” over harsh times, the claimants providing a scapegoat and a rung on the ladder lower yet than our own.

In austerity, with unemployment climbing, the force of the images is magnified, even upon those previously immune. The values that impact on many disabled people now confront others too. In the face off between “do as you would be done by” and “every man for himself,” (Morris, 2012, 18’) lies the biggest battle of all, far beyond benefits reforms or cutbacks and on to the prevailing ideology that drives them (Williams, 2012), denigrating and disenfranchising all who do not conform. The message in these images defines disabled people’s life chances, but confines us all. And yet, for every one of us who does not conform, we shake it to its roots.

So here is an alternative for an abiding legacy. Beyond digging in, for those of us who have to and those who chose to align with us, is the possibility of showing another way. It questions both the imperative to conform and the shape of the mould. It is a possibility of imagining and demonstrating different ways of being, versions of ourselves that are as radically diverse as we are or need to be. It is a hope that in saying “we can do this better,” we might nudge towards a system that incorporates and includes, a re-reckoning of what makes any of us, disabled or not, human.

In the onslaught of images, campaigners and protesters, disabled people and allies, have shown what we can be in the most compelling picture of all. Away from the public gaze, in relentless defense of protecting a community, there have been skills and strategies amassed, abiding compassion, organization and resilience on a scale to move mountains. It is a different kind of productivity. There has been imagination and humor, alliances built, agendas shaped, the bearing of witness and feeding of courage. Fears have been allowed and defeat rejected. And, at the core, has been a refusal to comply, a pride in answering back, a quiet knowing that it is not we who are wrong. From out of the invisible gulf, our response to events is what defines us.

The summer of 2012 saw the perfect storm. And here is our legacy - to question the way things are and to show better ways of being in the world. It is another version of heroism, entirely visible if only people think to look.

Liz Crow is an artist-activist working in film, performance and text, using the power of creative work as a tool for change. She is founder of Roaring Girl Productions (www.roaring-girl.com) and a doctoral student at Bristol University's graduate school of education.

References

Barnes, C., Mercer, G. & Shakespeare, T. (1999). *Exploring disability: A sociological introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bashall, R. (2012). Audience comment at Inclusion London: *Re-thinking disability equality policy and practice in a hostile climate*, September 27, London. [Video file]. Retrieved from: http://www.livestream.com/ncodp/video?clipId=pla_34b7e309-78db-4353-80e9-fb52d29e399e&utm_source=library&utm_medium=ui-thumb (1h33')

BBC News. (2012). London 2012: Your Paralympic moments. *BBC News UK*, September 12. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-19523781>

Begg, A. (2012). It's not the benefit fraudsters who are targeted in the media, it's the disabled. *The Independent*, August 3. <http://blogs.independent.co.uk/2012/08/03/its-not-the-benefit-fraudsters-who-are-targeted-in-the-media-its-the-disabled/>

Briant, E., Watson, N., & Philo, G. (2011). *Bad news for disabled people: How the newspapers are reporting disability*. Glasgow: Strathclyde Centre for Disability Research and Glasgow Media Unit, University of Glasgow.

Brown, J. (2012). Atos assessor 'forced to judge disabled fit for work'. *The Independent*, September 25. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/atos-assessor-forced-to-judge-disabled-fit-for-work-8168260.html>

Channel 4. (2012). George Osborne booed at Paralympics medal ceremony. *The Guardian*, September 4. [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/video/2012/sep/04/george-osborne-booed-paralympics-video>

Clarke, E. (2012). Shocking Research. Blog post. *Green Benches*. September 13. <http://eoin-clarke.blogspot.co.uk/2012/09/shocking-research-shows-that-43-of.html>

Collins, N. (2012). Made in Britain - stamped with pride on 2012. *The Telegraph*, September 9. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/olympics/paralympic-sport/paralympics-gb/9531662/Made-in-Britain-stamped-with-pride-on-2012-Lord-Coe-claims.html>

ComRes. (2010). Disabled people invisible in Britain today. *Scope*, October 10.

<http://www.scope.org.uk/news/comres-poll>

ComRes. (2011). Poll Digest: Social: Scope Discrimination Survey. *Scope*, May 15.

<http://www.comres.co.uk/poll/8/scope-discrimination-survey-15-may-2011.htm>

Crow, L. (2010). Resistance: Transforming the Future. Paper presented at International Disability Studies Conference, September 7-9, Lancaster University. <http://www.roaring-girl.com/productions/resistance-conversations/watch/>

DCMS. (2012). *Beyond 2012: The London legacy story*. London: Department for Culture, Media & Sport.

Department for Work & Pensions. (2011). *Fraud and Error in the Benefit System: Preliminary 2010/11 Estimates*. Leeds: DWP.

Department for Work & Pensions. (2012a). *Analysis of Incapacity Benefits: detailed medical condition and duration – update*. DWP.

Department for Work & Pensions. (2012b). *Training and Development: Revised WCA Handbook, ESA (LCW/LCWRA) Amendment Regulations 2011*. DWP.

de Wolfe, P. (2012). Reaping the benefits of sickness? Long term illness and the experience of welfare claims. *Disability & Society* 27:5: 617-630.

Disability Rights UK. (2012). *Press portrayal of disabled people: A rise in hostility fuelled by austerity?* London: Disability Rights UK.

Domokos, J. (2011). Jobcentre staff 'sent guidelines on how to deal with claimants' suicide threats'. *The Guardian*, May 8. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/may/08/jobcentre->

[staff-guidelines-suicide-threats](#)

Disabled People Against the Cuts. (2012). The Closing Atos Ceremony. Blog post. DPAC. August 31. <http://www.dpac.uk.net/2012/08/friday-31st-august-the-closing-atos-ceremony/>

Edwards, C. (2012). *The austerity war and the impoverishment of disabled people*. Norwich: University of East Anglia/Norfolk Coalition of Disabled People.

Faculty of Occupational Medicine. (2012). Diploma in Disability Assessment Medicine. FOM of the Royal College of Physicians. <http://www.fom.ac.uk/education/non-specialist-qualifications-and-training/diplomas/ddam>

Garland-Thomson, R. (2009). *Staring: How we look*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gentleman, A. (2012). Disabled visitors say 'Paralympic bubble' does not reflect Britain's reality. *The Guardian*, September 7. http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/sep/07/disabled-visitors-paralympic-bubble-reality?CMP=tw_t_gu

Goulden, C. (2012) The bitter irony of the hardening attitudes towards 'benefit scroungers'. Blog post. *Joseph Rowntree Foundation*. September 17. <http://www.jrf.org.uk/blog/2012/09/hardening-attitudes-benefit-scroungers>

Grayling, C. (Work & Pensions Committee House of Commons). (2011). *Migration to Employment and Support Allowance*. House of Commons: UK Parliament (Uncorrected transcript of oral evidence, HC 1015-iii). HC Deb 4 September 2012. Atos Healthcare Debate. c17WH.

Hevey, D. (1992). *The creatures time forgot: Photography and disability*. London: Routledge.

Holtzman, L. (2000). *Media messages: What film, television and popular music teach us about race, class, gender and sexual orientation*. New York: ME Sharpe.

International Paralympic Committee (2003). *Paralympic Vision and Mission*, in IPC Handbook, Section 1, Chapter 1.1. April 2003.

Jolly, D. (2012a). A Tale of two Models: Disabled People vs Unum, Atos, Government and Disability Charities. *DPAC*, April 8. <http://www.dpac.uk.net/2012/04/a-tale-of-two-models-disabled-people-vs-unum-atos-government-and-disability-charities-debbie-jolly/>

Jolly, D. (2012b). Presentation at Inclusion London: Re-thinking disability equality policy and practice in a hostile climate, September 27, London. [Video file]. Retrieved from http://www.livestream.com/ncodp/video?clipId=pla_34b7e309-78db-4353-80e9-fb52d29e399e&utm_source=library&utm_medium=ui-thumb (PM25’).

Journalisted. (2012). Paralympics, reshuffle and Nutkins. *Journalisted, The Media Standards Trust*, September 10. <http://journalisted.com/news/weekly-digest-03-09-2012>

Kohn, D. (2009). Did Insurer Cheat Disabled Clients? *CBS News.com*, February 11. http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-18560_162-529601.html

Lakhani, N. (2012). Paralympic sponsor engulfed by disability test row. *The Independent*, August 29. <http://www.independent.co.uk/sport/olympics/paralympics/paralympic-sponsor-engulfed-by-disability-tests-row-8084799.html>

Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Long, J. (2012). Dispatches: Britain on the Sick: Reporter Feature. *Channel 4*, July 30.
<http://www.channel4.com/programmes/dispatches/articles/britain-on-the-sick-reporter-feature>

Lusher, A. (2012). Paralympics 2012: from the battlefield to the sports field, meet the armed forces Paralympians. *The Telegraph*, August 26.
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/olympics/paralympic-sport/9496721/Paralympics-2012-from-the-battlefield-to-the-sports-field-meet-the-armed-forces-Paralympians.html>

Lydall, R. (2012). London 2012 Paralympics: Channel 4 tells of shark attack and rail accident in 'superhuman' stories. *London Evening Standard*, August 17.
<http://www.standard.co.uk/olympics/olympic-news/london-2012-paralympics-channel-4-tells-of-shark-attack-and-rail-accident-in-superhuman-stories-8056807.html>

Malik, S. (2012). Disabled benefits claimants face £71 a week fines for breaching work plan. *The Guardian*, September 3. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/sep/03/disabled-benefits-claimants-fines-work>

Mosse, G. (1996). Fascist aesthetics and society: Some considerations. *Journal of Contemporary History*. 31(2), 245-252.

Morenatti, E. (2012). Activist Patrick Lynch sobs during a protest next to Atos's London headquarters. *The Washington Post*, August 29 (photograph).
http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2012-paralympic-games-begin-in-london/2012/08/29/e759c3a6-f201-11e1-adc6-87dfa8eff430_gallery.html#photo=15

Moreton, C. (2012). Paralympic Games: Inside the theatre of miracles. *The Telegraph*, September 9. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/olympics/paralympic-sport/9530103/Paralympic-Games-Inside-the-theatre-of-miracles.html>

Morris, J. (2012). Presentation at Inclusion London: Re-thinking disability equality policy and practice in a hostile climate, September 27, London.

http://www.livestream.com/ncodp/video?clipId=pla_34b7e309-78db-4353-80e9-fb52d29e399e&utm_source=Islibrary&utm_medium=ui-thumb (11').

Mundy, J. (2011). *Unum* - The Outlaw Insurance Company. *Lawyers and Settlements.com*, April 13. http://www.lawyersandsettlements.com/articles/first_unum/unum-insurance-disability-claims-11-16462.html#.UGod0o4syr8

Newton Dunn, T. (2012). Blitz the £1.2bn fiddlers. *The Sun*, February 29.

<http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/politics/4161400/Blitz-the-12bn-fiddlers.html>

Newton Dunn, T. (2010). Iain Duncan Smith on benefits Britain. *The Sun*, December 1.

<http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/3254131/We-are-living-in-a-shirkers-paradise-in-the-UK.html>

Office for Disability Issues. (2011). *London 2012: A legacy for disabled people*. London: ODI.

Peers, D. (2009). (Dis)empowering Paralympic histories: absent athletes and disabling discourses. *Disability & Society*, 24,5: 653–665.

Phillips, M. (2012). Incredible Ellie and a triumph over the culture of victimhood. *Mail Online*, September 2. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2197331/Incredible-Ellie-Simmonds-triumph-culture-victimhood.html#ixzz25PUzbyWl>

Pring, J. (2012). London 2012: The Atos cover-up continues. *Disability News Service*, September 6. <http://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/index.php/2012/09/london-2012-the-atos-cover-up-continues/>

Private Eye. (2011). Mutual Benefits. *The Back, Private Eye*, November 8. http://www.private-eye.co.uk/sections.php?section_link=in_the_back&issue=1301&article=450

Purdue, D. & Howe, P. (2012). Empower, inspire, achieve: (Dis)empowerment and the Paralympic Games. *Disability & Society*, 1-14.

Quarmby, K. (2012). Leveson is showing willful blindness towards disabled people. *The Guardian*, May 8. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/may/08/leveson-willful-blindness-disabled-people>

Riley-Smith, B. (2012). Hate crimes against disabled people soar to a record level. *The Guardian*, June 19. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/hate-crimes-against-disabled-people-soar-to-a-record-level-7858841.html>

Shakespeare, T. (2012). All being equal: Personal thoughts about the Paralympics, Tom's Notes. Facebook, August 29. <http://www.facebook.com/notes/tom-shakespeare10150985733085653/all-being-equal-personal-thoughts-about-the-paralympics/>

Sommerlad, N. (2012). 32 die a week after failing test for new incapacity benefit. *Mirror*, April 4. <http://blogs.mirror.co.uk/investigations/2012/04/32-die-a-week-after-failing-in.html>

Stanton, G. (1996). The 8 Stages of Genocide. Genocide Watch. <http://www.genocidewatch.org/genocide/8stagesofgenocide.html>

Steel, M. (2012). They can't be disabled – they can swim. *The Independent*, August 29. <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/mark-steel/mark-steel-they-cant-be-disabled--they-can-swim-8084638.html#>

Sturken, M. & Cartwright, L. (2001). *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Talsania, K. (2012). Are Sun readers ready to 'Beat the Cheat' armed with the facts? *The Guardian*, March 7. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/mar/07/sun-beat-the-cheat-benefits>

Toolbox. (2012). Rep wants £200 to attend appeal with me...should I do it? The Full Facts, October 3 (online forum). <http://thefullfacts.com/esa/forum/viewtopic.php?f=22&t=2063>

Topping, A. (2012). Locog hails biggest and best Paralympics in history. *The Guardian*, September 6. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/2012/sep/06/paralympics-ticket-sales>

Toynbee, P. (2012). Celebrate Paralympians, but remember they needed state help to get there. *The Guardian*, August 23. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/aug/23/paralympians-state-help-disabled-benefits-cut>

Tweedy, S.M. & Bourke, J. (2009). *IPC Athletics Classification Project for Physical Impairments: Final Report – Stage 1*. IPC Athletics: Bonn.

Void, The. (2012). Remembering Those Who've Died at the Hands of Atos 'Healthcare'. Blog post. DPAC. August 29. <http://www.dpac.uk.net/2012/08/remembering-those-whove-died-at-the-hands-of-atos-healthcare/>

Wachman, R. & Wright, O. (2012). Fear of fitness to work tests driving disabled patients to suicide, say 6% of GPs. *The Independent*, October 4. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/fear-of-fitness-to-work-tests-driving-disabled-patients-to-suicide-say-6-of-gps-8197432.html>

Williams, M. (2012). Why are the disabled such a threat to this government? Blog post.

21stcenturyfix. September 18. <http://21stcenturyfix.org.uk/2012/09/why-are-the-disabled-such-a-threat-to-this-government/>