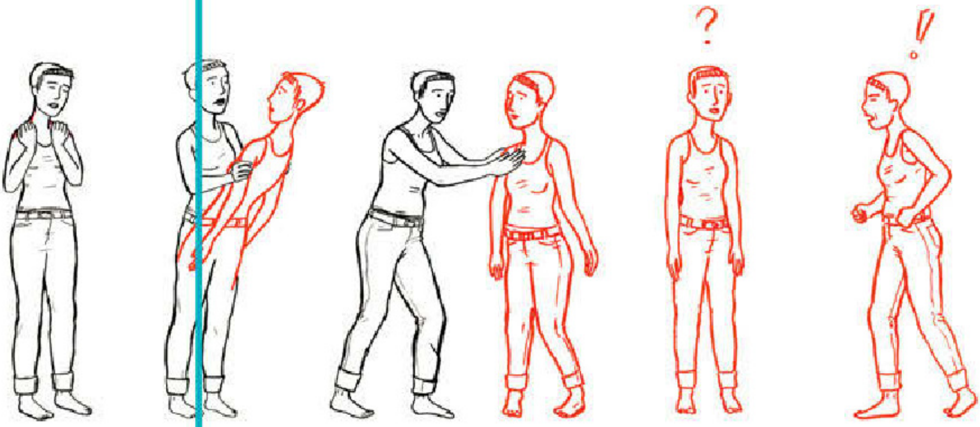
LITERARY
DISABILITY
STUDIES



DISABILITY IN COMIC BOOKS AND GRAPHIC NARRATIVES

EDITED BY
CHRIS FOSS,
JONATHAN W. GRAY
AND ZACH WHALEN

Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives

Literary Disability Studies

Series editors: Dr David Bolt (Liverpool Hope University, UK), Dr Elizabeth J. Donaldson (New York Institute of Technology, USA) and Dr Julia Miele Rodas (Bronx Community College/City University of New York, USA).

Literary Disability Studies is the first book series dedicated to the exploration of literature and literary topics from a disability studies perspective. Focused on literary content and informed by disability theory, disability research, disability activism, and disability experience, the Palgrave Macmillan series provides a home for a growing body of advanced scholarship exploring the ways in which the literary imagination intersects with historical and contemporary attitudes toward disability. This cutting-edge interdisciplinary work will include both monographs and edited collections (as well as focused research that does not fall within traditional monograph length). The series is supported by an editorial board of internationally recognised literary scholars specialising in disability studies.

David Bolt is Associate Professor of Disability and Education at Liverpool Hope University, UK.

Elizabeth J. Donaldson is Associate Professor of English at New York Institute of Technology, USA.

Julia Miele Rodas is Associate Professor of English at Bronx Community College/City University of New York, USA.

Titles include:

Chris Foss, Jonathan W. Gray, and Zach Whalen (*editors*)
DISABILITY IN COMIC BOOKS AND GRAPHIC NARRATIVES

Patricia Friedrich
THE LITERARY AND LINGUISTIC CONSTRUCTION OF
OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER
No Ordinary Doubt

Literary Disability Studies
Series Standing Order ISBN 978–1–1373–8525–3 hardback
978–1–1373–9147–6 paperback
(*outside North America only*)

You can receive future titles in this series as they are published by placing a standing order. Please contact your bookseller or, in case of difficulty, write to us at the address below with your name and address, the title of the series and the ISBN quoted above.

Customer Services Department, Macmillan Distribution Ltd, Houndmills,
Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS, England

Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives

Edited by

Chris Foss
Professor of English, University of Mary Washington, USA

Jonathan W. Gray
Associate Professor, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, USA

and

Zach Whalen
Associate Professor of English, University of Mary Washington, USA

palgrave
macmillan

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2016 978-1-137-50110-3

First published 2016 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

ISBN 978-1-349-69898-1 ISBN 978-1-137-50111-0 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9781137501110

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Disability in comic books and graphic narratives / [edited by] Chris Foss, Professor of English, University of Mary Washington; Jonathan W. Gray, Associate Professor, John Jay College of Criminal Justice; Zach Whalen, Associate Professor of English, University of Mary Washington.
pages cm
Summary: "Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives invites readers to consider both canonical and alternative graphic representations of disability. Some chapters focus on comic superheroes, from lesser-known protagonists like Cyborg and Helen Killer to classics such as Batgirl and Batman; many more explore the amazing range of graphic narratives revolving around disability, covering famous names such as Alison Bechdel and Chris Ware, as well as less familiar artists like Keiko Tobe and Georgia Webber. The volume also offers a broad spectrum of represented disabilities: amputation, autism, blindness, deafness, depression, Huntington's, multiple sclerosis, obsessive-compulsive disorder, speech impairment, and spinal injury. A number of the essays collected here show how comics continue to implicate themselves in the objectification and marginalization of persons with disabilities, perpetuating stale stereotypes and stigmas. At the same time, others stress how this medium simultaneously offers unique potential for transforming our understanding of disability in truly profound ways."—Provided by publisher.
Includes index.

1. Comic books, strips, etc.—History and criticism. 2. Graphic novels—History and criticism. 3. People with disabilities in literature. I. Foss, Chris, 1963– editor. II. Gray, Jonathan W., editor. III. Whalen, Zach, 1979– editor.
PN6714.D57 2016
741.5'9—dc23 2015032825

Typeset by MPS Limited, Chennai, India.

to Julia, Kirby, Mara, and Mom—
and in memory of my dad, Don Foss,
and my brothers, Dan and Eric Foss
cf

to Trixie Ferguson Gray—once more with feeling
jwg

to Stacy
zw

Contents

List of Illustrations

Foreword

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson

Most of us assume that comics and disability exist in two completely different worlds. Comics we consider to be funny and lighthearted, as in the old time "funny papers," the cheap often furtively pleasurable lowbrow comic books, or the witty elitist insider cartoons in *The New Yorker*. Comics, we think, are far from the earnest; they range from, at best, campy chic and lampooning to, at worst, philistine or even trashy. Disability, in contrast, we take to be grim or drenched in treacle, a topic or experience that invokes dread, discomfort, or sincerity. Comics are light; disability is heavy. Comics are inviting; disability is forbidding. Comics are cheerful; disability is dismal.

So bringing together the opposing realms of comics and disability—as Chris Foss, Jonathan W. Gray, and Zach Whalen do so well in *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives*—is the most engaging kind of juxtaposition that scholarly work in cultural studies can do these days. This fine collection of work shows us that our received understandings—our shared, common-sense assumptions—about comics and disabilities are not really very right. This book shows us much about what comics do with disability and what disability does to comics.

Even though what we think of as comic narratives and disability narratives seem at first very different stories for us, just a bit of reflection on this juxtaposition will remind us however that disability has a vibrant history of representation in comic characters. Those of us acculturated in the mid-twentieth-century television era learned about disability through Looney Tunes and other cartoons. Before the integration of people with disabilities into public spaces in the 1970s and 1980s, most disabled Americans were segregated from nondisabled Americans. So those of us who had never gone to school, worked, or lived with disabled people had only stereotypes from cultural representations such as cartoons to show us the lived experience of disability.

In television and other media, disability served to intensify the comic element of cartoon characters: Mr. Magoo was blind, Elmer

Fudd stuttered, Sylvester the Cat had a speech impairment, Porky and Petunia Pig were obese, Daffy Duck had a developmental disability. All manner of Disney characters (the Seven Dwarves, Captain Hook, Nemo, etc.) had disabilities that stood for character traits such as foolishness, malevolence, or heroism. Indeed, these hyperbolical disabled characters gather in the looney bin of Looney Tunes. The Muppets of the later twentieth century all departed from fully human characteristics in quirky, oddly endearing ways. They were human-animal hybrids or engaging freak show figures: Big Bird was both a lumbering humanesque bird and an avian fat person; Bert and Ernie were strangely comforting orange- and yellow-skinned boys who had three fingers on each hand, cranial deformities, and bulbous noses. Indeed, one convention of cartoon characters that differentiated them from normal people was that most of them—from Mickey and Minnie Mouse to the Muppets—had three fingers and a thumb, an unusual limb reduction disability that I always noticed because I have one hand like that as well. All of these departures from expected human embodiment made these comic characters novelties that engaged us but were distinct enough from us that they did not fall into the uncanny valley of the repellently too-close-to-but-not-quite human. Their ancestors are freaks and monsters who drew our interest and invoked our wonder from antiquity through the nineteenth century. Their more recent precursors are the political and cultural caricatures of seventeenth- through nineteenth-century print culture so effectively developed by pictorial satirists such as William Hogarth and Honoré Daumier on down through contemporary cartoonists such as Gary Trudeau and—more darkly—Charlie Hebdo.

Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives brings forward this enduring, if counterintuitive, entanglement of comic graphic narrative and disability narrative. Comics, in the broadest sense, provide expressive possibilities for vivid meaning-making through multimodal forms of representation. Comics offer much more than pictures and words. They combine textual, graphic, and sequential narrative. We get textual dialogue, thought bubbles, pictured embodiments, graphic design, successive cinematographic narrative, animation. All of these conventions work against the modern dominant media modes of prose text and photographic images, both often understood as the unmediated representation of truth. In other words, comics work in a different representational realm from these more venerated forms and challenge their stranglehold on truth telling.

The most distinct representational opportunity comics offer is hyperbole. Indeed, the signature of comics and graphic narratives is the departure from—even an assault on—the scale and order of what we take to be everyday reality. The fundamentals of comic graphic representation are exaggeration, fantasy, caricature, spectacle, irony, disorder, distortion. This comic mode ranges from the flamboyant caricature of the derisive political cartoon or the goofy Looney Tunes hybrid to the graphic (hyper)realism of David Small's *Stitches* (Chapter 2). Other graphic representations of embodiment participate in the unorthodox and the alternative, from the depiction of Helen Keller as a cyborg assassin (Chapter 9) to Thea, a central character in Alison Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For* (Chapter 12), and as such have an ironic relationship to realism. We might say that such representation is intensely embodied satire, though, as Allie Brosh's *Hyperbole and a Half* (Chapter 11) demonstrates, this representation need not be graphically robust.

Hyperbole makes comics a welcome home for mutants, monsters, freaks, and all manner of people with disabilities, even if the characters themselves have difficulty being reconciled to their status. Disability—as both a social construction and a lived experience—exists in the spaces of the out of scale. As a violation of the normal and expected, disability is disorder embodied: the enormous or diminutive, the misshapen or disordered, the reckless or sluggish, the flamboyant or silent, the profligate or insufficient—always either too much or too little. Such departures from the ordinary entice us with their novelty and enliven the reality of characters as distinctive as Batman (Chapter 10) and Cyborg (Chapter 8) or as quotidian as autistic family members (Chapters 6 and 7).

Such assaults on the bland usual and the rigid orthodox are a rich narrative and visual resource for meaning-making. Comics allow us to depart from the restrictions of the flesh, from the anchor in the mud that is normalcy, and to enter the realms of the improbable (if not the impossible) to make new stories about human experience. The rarest and most confounding forms of human embodiment are the most ordinary of comic characters, as exemplified in works such as Georgia Webber's *Dumb* (Chapter 1). The pleasure of comics is that they are an occasion to explore the generative elasticity of human embodied experience, as the character Oracle (Chapter 4) so ably represents. In this way, comics are always graphic freak shows, filled with spectacles and thrills.

Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives shows us how the conventions of representation in comics and graphic narratives align with disability. All representation does the cultural work of affirming received understandings and challenging them to create new stories, and this collection of analyses reveals this work admirably. Whether centered on a famous superhero like Superman (Chapter 5) or an unnamed amputee and her anthropomorphized apartment building (Chapter 3), the collection finds disability everywhere and expands any narrow understandings of what we think of as disability to more capaciously address the range of human ways of being we think of as illness and trauma, as well. Especially welcome are the considerations of access, description, tactile comics, and fresh opportunities to think through the experience of the ways of being and knowing we think of as disability as it shapes all of us and all families over all lifetimes.

Acknowledgements

All: First and foremost, we are incredibly grateful for all of the encouragement and help we have received throughout this process from the editors of Palgrave's Literary Disability series: David Bolt, Elizabeth J. Donaldson, and especially Julia Miele Rodas (without whom this project never would have happened). Speaking of Palgrave, we also owe a debt to everybody there, in particular Benjamin Doyle and Tomas René, but also Monica Kendall. Special thanks are due to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson for graciously agreeing to provide the Foreword and to Georgia Webber for generously allowing us to use one of her illustrations for our jacket image. Finally, to all of our contributors, know we truly appreciate all of your hard work under what often turned out to be very tight deadlines; thanks to you, we have a superb collection that is a significant contribution to the fields of both comics studies and disability studies.

Chris: I would like to begin by thanking the many friends and colleagues with whom I have talked with and/or written to about disability studies and/or autism studies, especially those with whom I have been privileged to share conference panels: James Berger, Alicia Broderick, Rochelle Gregory, Bev Harp, Leon Hilton, Michelle Jarman, Patrick McDonagh, Julie O'Connell, Summer O'Neal, Mark Osteen, Diana Paulin, Julia Miele Rodas, Ralph James Savarese, Shannon Walters, Kris Weller, and Melanie Yergeau—with special thanks to Julia and Ralph, with whom I presented the first draft of my chapter for this book at MLA 2011. I also want to give a shout out to my friends and family, who have (mostly unknowingly) provided me with perspective and happiness throughout this process—none more so than Mara Scanlon, who has both listened patiently to my frustrations and offered useful advice (having published an edited collection of her own with Palgrave just last year).

Notes on Contributors

José Alaniz is an Associate Professor in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures and the Department of Comparative Literature (adjunct) at the University of Washington-Seattle. He has published two books, *Komiks: Comic Art in Russia* (2010) and *Death, Disability and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond* (2014). His articles have appeared in the *International Journal of Comic Art, The Comics Journal, Ulbandus, Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema, The Slavic and East European Journal, Comics Forum*, and *Kinokultura*, as well as in such anthologies as *The Ages of the Avengers: Essays on Earth's Mightiest Heroes in Changing Times* (2014), *The Cinema of Alexander Sokurov* (2011), and *Russian Children's Literature and Culture* (2007). Since 2011 he has served as Chair of the Executive Committee of the International Comic Arts Forum (ICAF), the leading comics studies conference in the US. In 2014 he assumed the directorship of the University of Washington's Disability Studies Program. His research interests include death and dying, disability studies, film studies, ecocriticism, and comics studies. His current projects include *Disability in Alternative Comics* and a study on the representation of history in Czech graphic narrative.

Laurie Ann Carlson is an Associate Professor of English at North Shore Community College, where she teaches courses in Literature and Composition. She recently completed her Ph.D. in American Literature at the University of Rhode Island, with her dissertation, "Wired for Interdependency: Disabling Cyborg Identities in Feminist Science Fiction." Her work has appeared in *Feminist Media Studies* and *ADA: A Journal of Gender, New Media, & Technology*. Her research interests are in disability studies, feminist science fiction, American literature, popular culture, and women's studies.

Todd A. Comer, Professor of English at Defiance College, has co-edited three collections: on the (comics) writer Alan Moore, on "terror and the cinematic sublime," and on the regional politics of Occupy Wall Street. He has published essays on Joel and Ethan Coen, Samuel R. Delany, Flann O'Brien, and on the BBC television series

Doctor Who. He is currently writing a book on the ecological politics of director Peter Weir.

Mariah Crilley is a Ph.D. candidate at West Virginia University. She received her B.A. in English from Chatham University in Pittsburgh, PA and her M.A. in English from Duquesne University, also in Pittsburgh. Her research focuses on disability studies, ecocriticism, and American literature.

Jay Dolmage is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada. He is the editor of the *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* and author of *Disability Rhetoric* (2014). His essays on rhetoric, writing, and disability studies have appeared in several journals and edited collections, including *Cultural Critique* and *Rhetoric Review.* Jay grew up in the disability rights movement in Canada and remains committed to promoting greater access within higher education and across society.

Chris Foss is Professor of English at the University of Mary Washington, where he specializes in nineteenth-century British literature, with a secondary emphasis on disability studies. Within the latter field, he has published articles in *Disability Studies Quarterly* and *Pedagogy*, as well as a book chapter in *Kidding Around: The Child in Film and Media*. Further, he has served as a presenter and/or panelist on disability-related topics at 12 separate academic conferences. Most significantly, however, he is the child, sibling, and parent of individuals with disabilities.

Margaret Galvan is a Ph.D. candidate in English with a film studies certificate at The Graduate Center, City University of New York. She is writing a dissertation, entitled "Archiving the '80s: Feminism, Queer Theory, and Visual Culture," that traces a genealogy of queer theory in 1980s feminism through representations of sexuality in visual culture. Her project draws on archival research to recuperate materials like feminist underground comix and conference proceedings from the 1982 Barnard Conference on Sexuality, in addition to examining work by Gloria Anzaldúa, Alison Bechdel, and Nan Goldin. She teaches writing and research seminars in the Gallatin School of Individualized Study at New York University and works as an Instructional Technology Fellow at Brooklyn College. See margaretgalvan.org for further information.

Kristen Gay is a doctoral student in the Rhetorics, Communication, and Information Design program at Clemson University. Her interests include medical rhetorics, mental health rhetorics, feminist theory, and disability studies.

Jonathan W. Gray is Associate Professor of English at John Jay College-CUNY. He is the editor of the *Journal of Comics and Culture* and the author of *Civil Rights in the White Literary Imagination* (2013). Gray is currently working on a book project, *Illustrating the Race: Representing Blackness in American Comics*, that traces depictions of African Americans in comics from 1966 to the present. He has published academic articles on the Harlem Renaissance, Kyle Baker's graphic novel *Nat Turner,* and Jay Z's relationship to Black masculinity. His journalism on comics and popular culture has appeared at *EW.com*, *Salon.com*, and *The New Inquiry*.

Dale Jacobs is the author of *Graphic Encounters: Comics and the Sponsorship of Multimodal Literacy* (2013). His essays on comics have appeared in *English Journal*, *Journal of Teaching Writing*, *College Composition and Communication*, *Studies in Comics*, *ImageText*, and *Biography*. With Jay Dolmage, he published "Difficult Articulations: Comics Autobiography, Trauma, and Disability" in *The Future of Text and Image: Collected Essays on Literary and Visual Conjunctures* (2012). He is the editor of *The Myles Horton Reader* (2003) and the co-editor (with Laura Micciche) of *A Way to Move: Rhetorics of Emotion and Composition Studies* (2003).

Christina Maria Koch is a Ph.D. candidate in American studies at the Philipps University of Marburg, Germany, where she studies the representation of illness and embodiment in contemporary North American autobiographical comics/graphic narratives. She has also worked and published on the political iconography of the Guy Fawkes mask and is the recipient of the 2014 US Ambassador's Grant for Young Researchers in American Studies. Her research interests include intermedial (comics) narratology, visual culture studies, gender studies/feminist theories, disability studies, and the intersections of literature and medicine. She can be contacted at christina.koch@staff.uni-marburg.de.

Daniel Preston has taught writing and literature courses for SUNY Oswego and SUNY Albany. He is also a doctoral candidate in Cultural

Foundations of Education at Syracuse University, where he specializes in disability studies. He speaks often at conferences on ways that the social construction of disability operates within familiar narratives. Dan's work on *Finding Nemo* can be found in the November 2010 issue of the *English Journal,* and a chapter in *Through Their Eyes: Stories of Success of People with Disabilities* discusses *The Breakfast Club* (2010). Dan is now completing his dissertation on "Shakespeare, Disability, and the Teaching of Difference." For more information, you can visit Academia.edu at https://syr.academia.edu/DanielPreston.

Shannon Walters is an Assistant Professor of English at Temple University where she teaches and researches in rhetoric and composition, disability studies, and women's studies. She is the author of *Rhetorical Touch: Disability, Identification, Haptics*. Her work also appears in *JAC: A Journal of Rhetoric, Culture & Politics*, *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *Feminist Media Studies*, *Technical Communication Quarterly*, *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, and *PMLA*.

Zach Whalen is an Associate Professor of New Media in the Department of English, Linguistics, and Communication at the University of Mary Washington. With Laurie N. Taylor, he is the co-editor of *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games* (2008). His teaching focuses on the critical study and practice of digital media in a variety of genres, including video games, electronic literature, and a popular course on the graphic novel. He has published articles and essays on video games, including an article in *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* and book chapters on *Silent Hill, Grand Theft Auto*, and early videogame consoles.

Introduction: From Feats of Clay to Narrative Prose/thesis

Zach Whalen, Chris Foss, and Jonathan W. Gray

Comics: the combination of image and text juxtaposed in deliberate sequence for the purposes of exposition or storytelling. As a medium, comics depend on the interoperation of verbal and visual modalities and the coordination of a refined and specialized vocabulary of panels, word balloons, gutters, and emotive iconography. Via this interplay, comics in their various genres draw on a broad palette of expressive technologies to tell a wide range of stories, and from the mainstream to the underground, from webcomics to hardbound graphic novels, comics reach an incredibly diverse audience. Artists and readers alike find in comics an opportunity to create graphic narratives of epic heroism and intimate detail, reflecting both the greatest hopes and the smallest challenges of human experience.

With such a compelling array of expressive possibilities, comics intersect with many other forms of expression, so it is appropriate that the study of comics is an inherently interdisciplinary field, overlapping significantly with art history, cultural studies, literary studies, media studies, and many other areas. One valuable intersection, with the field of disability studies, is only just emerging, so this collection seeks to inaugurate an important set of conversations between comics studies and disability studies. While both are among the most vibrant areas of new work in the humanities, there has yet to be any substantial scrutiny of the complex confluences and intersections between them. Given that disability continues to be a major trope within so many graphic narratives, it is crucial to begin to apply disability studies approaches to a wide variety of comic forms and then to theorize multiple potential paradigms for how we can initiate a generative critical articulation of disability and sequential art.

Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives aims, with its broad scope, to provide productive and provocative ways of thinking about the nexus between comics (as one of the most popular and increasingly significant mediums for artistic expression) and disability (as one of the most fundamental and increasingly significant components to human identity). A number of the essays collected here engage with the fraught history of how disability has been represented in sequential art, delineating the numerous ways in which the comic medium continues to implicate itself in the objectification and marginalization of persons with disabilities, perpetuating stale stereotypes and stigmas. At the same time, many will stress how this medium, in both its form and its content, simultaneously offers some unique potential for transforming our understanding of disability, illness, and trauma.

Foregrounding this latter emphasis, this collection explores how sequential art encourages various views of disability that defy totalization and tokenism, views attuned to the socially and culturally constructed nature, as well as the inherently dynamic aspects, of such identities. The volume invites its readers to investigate both canonical and alternative graphic embodiments of disability in order to suggest that both community and individual might be reimagined through the emphatic personalization of the lived experience of disability in the face of longstanding public (particularly, professional) depersonalization. It celebrates the multimodal experience of reading comics as an integral aspect of these texts' potential to resist and reverse our ocularcentric age's hierarchies of looking (especially as reinforced by the politics of staring). Further, it highlights not only the interdisciplinary connections raised by a critical articulation of comics and disability, but also the insights such an articulation offers into other fundamental categories of difference and identity (such as class/privilege, gender/sexuality, and race/ethnicity).

Comic art is capable of both finely grained nuance and cartoonish broad strokes, and the history of how disability has been represented therein is as fraught with problematic tropes as it is rich for recuperative subversion of those tropes. As political caricature flourished in Regency England, it became a staple of cartoonists to amplify body difference or deformity for the purposes of satirical criticism. For example, one of George Cruikshank's unflattering depictions of the unpopular George IV depicts him as morbidly obese and seated with crutches at his sides, his legs swollen huge by gout or dropsy. Similarly, the hunchback character Mayeux appears in several nineteenth-century cartoonists' repertoire, with his physical difference underscoring his satirical representation of an ascendant bourgeoisie (Forbes 102). One need only peruse a few of the literally hundreds of cartoons depicting the Irish published throughout the last half of the nineteenth century as part of the legendary British weekly *Punch* to understand how ugliness, racial difference, and physical marks of visible difference became for many of these cartoonists and their audiences an easy stand-in for moral, political, or socioeconomic difference.

In a less overtly political but no less problematic example, Winsor McCay's Little Nemo makes his way through "Wooland" in a weekly strip from February 1906. Here, Nemo passes through a "Chamber of Horrors" populated with a group of figures whose bodies are labeled with puns indicating jokes on moral types that include a "stingy" banker with the long nose of anti-Semitic stereotype, a "rubber"-necking woman, and a microcephalic "pinhead." While certain of the idiomatic expressions may escape a contemporary reader, that McCay deploys these bodies to situate them as semantic objects of spectacle within a framework of alienation is consistent with what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson notes as the oppressive social relationship of staring (26). In comics, one might say, the gaze is formulaically or operationally exchanged for the normalizing stare, so it is no coincidence that the politics of representation within the medium-specific framework of comics is at its most visible and most oppressive in the same era which saw the phenomenon of the medical sideshow flourishing.

There are risks, of course, to overly simplifying a historical contiguity between representational modes, but the *Little Nemo* comic is more typical of the politics of representing disability in comics than might first appear. The "punchline," if we can call it that, of Nemo's visit to the Chamber of Horrors is he finds it boring in that he "could see just such people pass his home everyday"—implying not that these bodies are in his view normal but rather that a child-like perspective on the world allows Nemo to recognize in everyday society the qualities which the cartoonist must exaggerate through physical difference to make clear. The concluding and characteristically surreal turn at the end finds Nemo infatuated, selecting a "pretty young

Figure 1 In a 1906 *Little Nemo* strip, Nemo encounters a group of "Valentines," humans who personify various character traits through their distorted or exaggerated bodies (Winsor McCay, *Little Nemo in Slumberland, New York Herald* 11 Feb. 1906)

maid" to be his Valentine, only to discover to his horror that she is simply made of paper. (That Nemo is also made of paper—printed in a comic—will occur to him in later stories.)

What this example demonstrates is that comics are by their nature concerned with and bound up in the politics of representation by way of the normalizing or oppressive stare of their implied readers. Where Nemo stands in for the reader's position, his horror at the failings of representational media to faithfully fulfill the normative sexuality of his gaze authorizes the reader's vicarious enjoyment of the human subjects that Nemo otherwise finds boring. His distance from the reader undermines his earlier pretense at boredom and authorizes the scopophilic pleasure of the spectacle in the panels—a safe context for the kind of looking not sanctioned in public. In this way and many others, comics provide rich opportunity for interrogating the politics of representation and alterity, and the various cultural genres of comics intersect with those politics through different respective lenses.

As comics flourished in the early twentieth century, their popularity and independent marketability quickly evolved into the pervasive cultural form they remain today, with the comics industry as we know it bursting into full flower in 1938 with the emergence of Superman in the pages of Action Comics. In this process, disability becomes bound up with not only the representational affordances of the medium and its materiality, but also with the narrative structure of the kinds of stories written and illustrated for comic books. Superman's characterization—a selflessly altruistic character who hides his abilities behind a seemingly 'normal' alter ego—quickly became the template for the genre. This convention encouraged the creators who represented the Man of Steel and his many descendants to treat disability either as a character flaw—witness the legion of disabled villains who populate comics from the mentally unstable Joker to the disfigured Dr. Doom—or something to be seamlessly overcome following the acquisition of abilities far beyond those of mortal men. Billy Batson and Dr. Donald Blake, for example, are both hobbled with unspecified ailments that necessitate the use of a cane, but an incantatory ritual transforms each into a demi-god—Captain Marvel (or Shazam) and Thor, respectively. Representation in superhero comics evolved after World War II, spurred by both internal changes (such as a burgeoning stable of creators attracted to the freewheeling nature and outsized success of the industry) and external pressures on the form that culminated with the infamous 1954 hearings before the US Senate's Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency which resulted in the adoption of the Comics Code. In this context, it is notable that EC, the comic company singled out for censure, was also the one which most enthusiastically depicted non-normative bodies.

Comics today address many different audiences, and mainstream superhero comics from Marvel and DC are more diverse and realistic in their representations of humanity. At the same time, while comics have long included serious topics and complex narratives, Will Eisner's seminal graphic novel *A Contract with God* and its sequels refined a different set of expressive tropes for graphic narrative. In one of his stories, "The Enchanted Prince," Eisner draws a reality from the point of view of a character with "something awry ... in the soft circuitry of his brain" (239) who finds a brief moment of clarity just before turning inward again after a traumatic event. That Aaron's attempt to interact with an outside world leads to his accidentally killing someone (a thug preparing to ambush a character featured in other stories in the book) positions his ability and disability squarely in service of another character's mobility through the plot, but the marked shift in Eisner's illustration of Aaron's alienation signals something more nuanced than what Michael T. Hayes and Rhonda S. Black identify as a "discourse of pity" prevalent in other media works that portray neurological diversity. In "The Enchanted Prince," swirling layers of thick lines and threatening eyes provide the framing typically accomplished via rectilinear panels. After Aaron finally confronts God (echoing both verbally and visually Frimme Hersch's "argument" in the first *Contract* story), Eisner's page framing shifts to an uncharacteristically dense and ordered grid of discrete panels. This stabilized order is temporary, but it follows Aaron's trajectory toward integration with his community in a way that Eisner shows is a contrast between ways of seeing and ways of constructing one's relationship to that world which effectively makes visual a typically invisible disability. In this way, Eisner uses the language of comics to portray Aaron's subjectivity, showing his experience of reality as complex, evolving, and fragile. In this context, it is also significant that Aaron's agency collapses in an alleyway encounter that begins as the thug asks, "Beat it, ... nut!" with a linguistic irruption which calls attention to and constructs Aaron's difference.

More recently, comics have moved online and embraced the opportunities of new technology for finding and reaching audiences through alternative narrative structures and more accessible platforms. Many web-based comics, for instance, make good use of the web's built-in accommodations for blind/visually impaired readers. Simply by adding an "alt" attribute to an image tag, web authors can provide a textual description of an image to be read to these readers. Many webcomics actually use the "alt" tag to provide "alternative" scripts or punchlines to daily narrative, but several of these (Ryan North's *Dinosaur Comics*, for example) also post transcriptions of their comics. Popular webcomic publishing platforms like Comic Easel or SmackJeeves.com make providing such content a regular part of the comic publishing workflow.

As a collection focused on the intersection of disability with sequential art and, more broadly, interested in interfacing comics studies and disability studies, this book offers a wide-ranging treatment of many topics and texts, with contributors offering extended analyses of both mainstream and independently published comics. In the essays that follow, three overarching and intersecting questions organize and motivate these explorations of sequential art and disability: representations of disability in comics, narrative prosthetics of disability in comics, and reevaluations of comics theory through the lens of disability. While certain chapters will focus on one or another comics genre or text, the clearest progression of thematic unity across each of these texts follows these three topical interventions to develop a diverse and rich critical engagement with the intersection of these two fields.

First, comics are fundamentally representational media that incorporate images of the body in all ranges of ability, including (most visibly) the superability of empowered heroes. In other genres or comics modalities, such as graphic memoir, differentiated ability is one aspect of self-reflection and identity that many writers have explored. All told, these texts have treated the subject with a surprisingly nuanced variety of approaches and assumptions. Contributors explore some of these topics with chapters revolving around not only classic comics protagonists such as Batgirl/Oracle and Batman, but also more unfamiliar figures like Cyborg and Helen Killer; similarly, some focus upon famous names from the graphic narrative genre like Alison Bechdel and Chris Ware, while others consider lesser-known graphic collaborators such as Judy Karasik and Paul Karasik or Steven T. Seagle and Teddy Kristiansen.

A second thread linking the discussions in these chapters examines the graphical deployment of disability as narrative prosthesis: the concept, articulated by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, argues that the disabled body functions in literature as a "crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power" (49). In comics, representations of human experiences of any ability are fundamentally graphical representations, but these graphical materialities are embedded in the semantic relationships among images on a page. When Thierry Groensteen borrows the medical term "arthrology" (the study of joints and their articulations) to describe the visual structures of comics' "spatio-topical" system, he indirectly underscores the link between graphic narrative as a semantic structure based on (abled) embodiment. This analogy to the body, like the phrase "narrative prosthesis," suggests how and why comics may be especially prone to the sort of "disruptive punch" noted by Mitchell and Snyder (49).

A final critical theme within this collection is an approach to comics studies that interrogates existing approaches to theorizing the medium itself. Instead of taking for granted the formal poetics of Scott McCloud's influential work, and using McCloud and other theorists more as a starting point, several contributors use the occasion of exploring disability to unpack the able-bodied assumptions underlying his theories. It is in developing this intervention into comics studies that the intersection offered here with disability studies is at its most valuable, as contributors draw upon the work of significant sequential art scholars like Hillary Chute, Groensteen, Charles Hatfield, McCloud, and others. The theoretical intersection of this book's arguments works in the other direction as well, as contributors also engage with the work of seminal disability studies theorists such as Garland-Thomson, Robert McRuer, Mitchell and Snyder, and Susan Squier.

Even more significantly, while exploring each of these three themes, the chapters in *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives* examine a truly broad spectrum of represented disabilities (both visible and invisible)—including amputation, autism, blindness, deafness, depression, Huntington's, multiple sclerosis, obsessive-compulsive disorder, speech impairment, and spinal injury. Nevertheless, we are aware this project might strike some as potentially exclusionary in nature toward blind/visually impaired readers. There are indeed numerous problems for this significant audience inherent in considerations of any art that typically expects some sort of substantial visual interaction. We therefore feel it is crucial to highlight this concern here briefly, in part by recommending as required reading the substantial body of work around this focus point by Literary Disability series editor David Bolt, as well as the 2009 special issue of *Journal of Cultural and Literary Disability Studies* on blindness and literature and the 2013 special issue of *Disability Studies Quarterly* on blindness and museum experience, which foreground two vital focus points for any deliberations on such matters: representation and access, respectively.

This volume has attempted to address the former via the inclusion of a chapter analyzing the depiction of a blind protagonist, Helen Keller/Killer. Regarding the latter, a quick perusal of its pages will reveal what may at first glance appear to be a singularly striking omission for a book on sequential art—namely, the dearth of illustrations. This ended up being primarily a consequence of more practical issues involving permissions and word count, but nonetheless it allowed us to encourage contributors to provide very detailed in-text verbal descriptions of the images to which they wanted to draw critical attention. In one sense, such thorough written accounts of this visual evidence puts blind/visually impaired readers at substantially less of a disadvantage than if they were facing a collection heavily dependent upon additive ("where words amplify or elaborate on an image" [McCloud 154]) and/or parallel (where "words and pictures seem to follow very different courses—without intersecting" [McCloud 154]) combinations in chapters consistently relying on the reproduction of multiple figures. This is by no means to imply we see the conundrum as (re)solved; rather, we recognize the need for further dialogue and discussion (including serious critical reflection on the transformative possibilities suggested by the exciting appearance of Philipp Meyer's tactile comic *Life* [2013]). Overall, though, we are confident that through the impressive array of crucial critical voices and different lived experiences of disability detailed above, this collection offers a current, diverse, and wide-ranging series of evocative and inventive meditations on the vital nexus of disability and sequential art.

Jay Dolmage and Dale Jacobs open the collection with a crucial and foundational intervention tracing the logics of disability through the rhetoric of comics. By focusing on autobiography, Dolmage and Jacobs show how multiple modes of representation allow meanings to proliferate through the tensions inherent in the act of representation. With a close examination of Georgia Webber's *Dumb*, "Mutable Articulations: Disability Rhetorics and the Comics Medium" places comics theory into productive dialogue with disability theory and moves toward a disability rhetoric for the comic form.

Like *Dumb*, David Small's memoir *Stitches* focuses on loss of speech and feelings of isolation. Christina Maria Koch's "'When you have no voice, you don't exist'? Envisioning Disability in David Small's *Stitches*" analyzes the social dimension of disability and illness through the ways in which *Stitches* constructs subjectivity via visual aesthetics and page structure. Revealing the links of disability and illness to visuality and (in)visibility, Koch traces the effects of an intrusive and depersonalizing medical gaze, exemplified in an x-ray procedure. In response, the protagonist's efforts to "stare back" are visualized in a silent defiance through which the character's illustration and the book's panel layout become sites of resistance.

With a similar focus on narrative and panel structure, as well as on the tension between visuality and visibility, Todd A. Comer's "The Hidden Architecture of Disability: Chris Ware's *Building Stories*" explores the implications of Ware's finely tuned spatial textuality, arguing ultimately that *Building Stories* falls into an ableist representational mode. This critique focuses on the unnamed woman, an amputee, at the center of this narrative, who by representing an individual instance of a universal human condition, acts as a "material metaphor" that brings the literally fragmented pieces of Ware's work together figuratively as a coherent, healthy whole. Comer argues through further examples and analyses that disability is a central metaphor in *Building Stories* which works through issues of form, power, interpretation, and community.

Turning to another central figure in the intersections of comics with disability, José Alaniz examines key aspects of Oracle/Barbara Gordon, the most well-known post-Silver Age disabled superhero. In "Standing Orders: Oracle, Disability, and Retconning," Alaniz explores Gordon's identity as a wheelchair user, leader, and hacker; the representation of her life as a paraplegic; and the controversy surrounding a 2011 reboot of her character as the able-bodied Batgirl. Alaniz argues that Oracle's career and "disappearance" reflect attitudes toward the disabled in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century US and that the public reception of her transformation highlights the paradoxes and politics of retconning in contemporary superhero comics.

Continuing to reflect on the problems of representation in superhero comics, Mariah Crilley explores the subjective politics of representation and representations of embodiment in "'Drawing Disability: Superman, Huntington's, and the Comic Form in *It's a Bird* … ." In her study of Seagle and Kristiansen's graphic novel, Crilley argues that the text reflects and reworks the comic genre's pervasive misuse of disabled bodies. The central tension in *It's a Bird* … juxtaposes Superman, the most famous and most perfect superhero, with the degenerative Huntington's disease, and in doing so interrogates the supremacy of able-bodiedness and physical normalcy. Simultaneously, the text grapples with the real, lived, material horrors of disease, disorder, and disability. With particular attention to vision and visibility, Crilley suggests that *It's a Bird* … represents an example of how comics can materialize disability without resorting to stereotyping or romanticism.

As a collection approaching both sequential art and disability in the broadest possible sense, this book moves next into a different genre, manga, with Chris Foss's "Reading in Pictures: Re-visioning Autism and Literature through the Medium of Manga." Here, Foss proposes the possibility that manga texts provide a more material means through which to communicate the lived experience of autism and/or even encourage a more properly “autistic” reading experience. This chapter explores the extent to which the more conceptual and less linear aspects of Keiko Tobe’s manga texts from her series *With the Light: Raising an Autistic Child,* together with the multimodal reading experience they foster, speak to numerous aspects of autistic embodiment. In dialogue with both autistic writers and sequential art scholars, Foss effects an open-ended critical articulation of autism and manga characterized by a mapping around of space from which to consider multiple theoretical prospects.

Making a similar connection between the fundamental interaction of image and text within the literary representation of autism, Shannon Walters explores questions of comic form in “Graphic Violence in Word and Image: Reimagining Closure in *The Ride Together*.” *The Ride Together* explores the Karasik siblings’ response to the possibility their autistic brother may have been abused at his residential facility, a possibility that deeply affects the graphic elements of the memoir. Walters shows that, rather than an autonomous symbiotic relationship between word and images, the context of violence and disability causes words and images to interact differently. This reevaluation leads Walters to reconsider the neurotypical foundations of closure in comics theory and to offer other possibilities based on neurodiverse perspectives.

Jonathan W. Gray’s “‘Why Couldn’t You Let Me Die?’: Cyborg, Social Death, and Narratives of Black Disability” returns to the exploration of superheroic narratives of medical recovery from crippling physical trauma. Observing that Cyborg is not only superhuman but also post-human, Gray argues for interrogating Cyborg’s status as a triple-minority: post-human, Black, and disabled. This chapter interrogates the facile conflation of racial abjection and disability in superhero comics by questioning the teleological narrative that links overcoming a life-altering injury with transcending race in order to establish his identity as a superhero, a conflation which continues despite Cyborg’s recently retconned promotion from the Teen Titans to The Justice League.

While Cyborg is an important character in the continuity of one of the major comics publishers, Helen Keller is reimagined as a cyborg assassin in the provocative *Helen Killer* series from relative newcomer

Arcana Comics. Laurie Ann Carlson shows how this reinvention of Keller critiques the mythology surrounding perhaps the most famous disabled person in American culture. In "'You Only Need Three Senses for This': The Disruptive Potentiality of Cyborg Helen Keller," Carlson shows how this comic disrupts the dominant conservative message about perseverance over adversity that preserves Keller in her adolescence and ignores the radical pursuits of her adult life, instead showing her to be a more radical, sexualized adult woman in control of her own narrative. Although the series reconfigures Keller with powers that bear no reference to reality, it is through this rupture in realism that a reexamination of Keller through the lens of disability studies becomes possible.

A similar reexamination of a familiar mythology becomes possible in Daniel Preston's analysis of *Batman: Knightfall* and *Batman—Vampire* in "Cripping the Bat: Troubling Images of Batman." Focusing first on *Knightfall*, Preston demonstrates how both the narrative and the artwork create a problematically romanticized and unrealistic story of healing. While, in *Vampire*, Preston finds images and language that specifically evoke the discourse of monstrosity and the freak show, he argues they underscore impairment and alterity in a way that ultimately subverts these frameworks.

Kristen Gay then turns attention back toward the quotidian with her examination of the emerging genre of the illness memoir in "Breaking Up [at/with] Illness Narratives." Central to Gay's thesis is a focus on the way Ellen Forney, in *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me*, attempts to navigate her complex identities in the midst of a medical diagnosis that imposes a narrative on her which demands the rationalization and resolution of illness. Further, Gay contends that Allie Brosh's *Hyperbole and a Half* exemplifies a refusal to align apparently random experiences with illness to a narrative structure which otherwise seeks to explain the onset of illness and resolve it with a hopeful ending. These writers' subjective and uncertain approaches to diagnosis and illness respond to conventions rooted in classical rhetoric regarding the relationship of rhetoric and medicine and to expectations for proper structure and confessional writing.

With a subtitle suggestive of other classical modalities (*A Family Tragicomic*), Bechdel's *Fun Home* is one of the most well-known and widely praised American graphic novels. While much scholarship on it focuses on the narrative's nuanced ideas about queer identity, few have examined how Bechdel's obsessive-compulsive disorder intersects with her developing sense of self. Margaret Galvan concludes this collection by untangling how these two identities intersect in *Fun Home* with "Thinking through Thea: Alison Bechdel's Representations of Disability." Following the work of McCruer's *Crip Theory*, Galvan traces Bechdel's valuing of disability through her earlier work, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, and her representation there of Thea, a Jewish lesbian with multiple sclerosis. Ultimately, this chapter, like the essay that opens this collection, uses a focus on representations of disability to challenge McCloud's theories of comics vocabulary and to enact a more diverse visual politics in sequential art.

Featuring a broad range of approaches, all of these chapters—linked by themes focusing on representation, narrative structure, and theory—emphasize diversity with respect to the genres of comics under analysis and the types of disability represented in those texts. As a whole, *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives* effects a crucial critical articulation of disability and sequential art, one that insists upon a fundamental role for disability (as a natural form of difference) in any comprehensive conception of human identity.

Works cited

Eisner, Will. *The Contract with God Trilogy: Life on Dropsie Avenue*. New York: Norton, 2005.

Forbes, Amy Wiese. *The Satiric Decade: Satire and the Rise of Republicanism in France, 1830–1840*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

Groensteen, Thierry. *The System of Comics*. Trans. Bart Beath. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007.

Hayes, Michael T., and Rhonda S. Black. "Troubling Signs: Disability, Hollywood Movies and the Construction of a Discourse of Pity." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 23.2 (2003): n.p. Web.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Kitchen Sink Press/Harper Perennial, 1993.

Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001.

1

Mutable Articulations: Disability Rhetorics and the Comics Medium

Jay Dolmage and Dale Jacobs

In our earlier collaborative essay, "Difficult Articulations: Comics Autobiography, Trauma, and Disability," we argued that as multimodal texts, comics in general and comics autobiography in particular allow for multiple modes of representation, while also providing, or at least potentially providing, the means to question the limitations of these modes. As well, comics demand that we attend closely to the multiple forms of expression available in the medium, while seeing these forms as interconnected rather than hierarchical. Finally, comics allow meanings to multiply in the tension created by the act of representation. In this way, we see the potential of comics to go beyond the use of disability as narrative prosthesis—a kind of multimodal, narrative shorthand—and to *become a form of prosthesis themselves*, an additional tool in making meaning accessible and for intervening in and interrogating disability as what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls a "representational system" (19).[1] In what ways, then, can existing theories of the rhetoric of comics also be (re)framed as disability rhetorics?

For instance, how can we question multimodal literacy from the perspective of sensory access, affordance, and constraint? How do disability studies theories of embodiment and identity map onto graphic narratives, in particular through the multiple iterations of (a transitional or fragmented) self in the comics medium? How can comics concepts like arthrology (Groensteen), transtextuality (Genette), or multimodality (Jacobs) be considered for their prosthetic possibilities? By examining Georgia Webber's *Dumb* in some detail, we attempt to put comics theory into productive dialogue with disability theory, as a means to interrogate and develop a disability rhetoric for the comic form.

Comics theory/disability theory

As readers engage with a comics text, they make sense of the multimodal elements (including the visual, the linguistic, the gestural, the audio, and the spatial) of each page or page spread, the arthrological connections between panels, and the multiple kinds of transtextual connections between this text and myriad other texts, including intertextuality (direct references to other texts), paratextuality (elements such as the title, chapter headings, epigraphs, and so on that work as an entry point to the text for readers), metatextuality (critical commentary of one text on another), hypertextuality (modification of one text by another, as in spoof or parody), and architextuality (assignation of a text to a given genre or genres). Thierry Groensteen's notion of arthrology and Gerard Genette's concept of transtextuality help explain how readers make connections within and between texts as additional meanings accrue through this layering of connections. These linkages can account for how readers move beyond the individual page and make sense of a comics text as a whole. Taken together, multimodality, arthrology, and transtextuality account for the multiple modes of meaning-making, the mutability of expression, and the tensions inherent in the act of representation itself.

In this essay we will amplify these inherent connections by focusing on comics as both a space for negotiating the meanings around bodies/minds and an embodied form of expression, what Hilary Chute calls "a haptic form" that "demands tactility, a physical intimacy with the reader in the acts of cognition and visual scrutiny" (112). In doing so, we will build on recent disability studies work that calls for attention not just to how meaning is attached to disability, but that views the knowledge and meaning which disability *generates*, moving beyond policing negative portrayals of disability to recognizing disability as an engine of innovation and rhetorical invention.

Scholars have recently explored how comics can be used to teach critical approaches to medicine and medicalization (Green, Vaccarella); how the medium allows for the representation of a wider range of sensory engagement, for instance, for autistics (Birge); how comics challenge normalcy and invite a more "genuine encounter with the experience of disability" (Squier); and how comics encourage the reader to recognize disease and disability in individuated, non-monolithic ways (Engelmann). This work builds upon early critiques of comics' simplified representation of disability as evil or as a pitiable sign of weakness (Johnson) and the common "super-crip" or overcoming narratives within comics (Carpenter). Importantly, recent disability studies work also dovetails with a larger trend in theories of comics autobiography, in which the form itself is seen as capable of enhancing, even as it problematizes, relationships between self and other. As Gillian Whitlock writes, "the unique vocabulary and grammar of cartoons and comic drawing might produce an imaginative and ethical engagement with the proximity of the other" (978). Jared Gardner elaborates that comics, especially "autography," can allow attachment and distance, doubt and certainty, common and individual suffering, to share the frame (12). Within this discussion, disability studies is uniquely and ideally positioned to trouble and interrogate meanings around the bodies and experiences of comics selves and others, to question how the form both represents and creates non-normative transformations of body and mind, and to develop new disability rhetorics.

Diagnosis

In order to explore these concepts and the connections between comics theory and disability rhetorics, let us now turn to Georgia Webber's comics series, *Dumb*.[2] Independently produced and distributed (and, as of this writing, on Issue 5), *Dumb* is, in Webber's words, "a comics series about my prolonged voice loss, and the slow crawl of recovery" (n.p.). Copies of the comic can be purchased at http://georgiasdumbproject.com. In the first issue, in which Georgia's persistent throat pain is diagnosed as an injury resulting from her overuse/abuse of her vocal chords, Webber sets the stage for the chronicle of voice loss in the subsequent issues. As well, this issue establishes the connection between the color red (the only color used other than black, gray, and white) and voice/sound, a connection to which she will turn repeatedly throughout the series.

As is the case in many disability narratives, it is only when Webber has been diagnosed by a doctor that this story becomes officially *about* disability. That is, disability often seems to demand to be defined in medical terms by a medical professional in films, novels, and comics narratives: for example, in the canonical *Rain Man*, a film that many people associate with disability, we are "properly" introduced to Raymond when Dr. Bruner offers an inventory of his disabilities and an assessment of his ability to "function" despite his autism. The disability needs to be "ablesplained" by a medical authority—and these explanations often usurp the voice or perspective of the narrator and overwrite their identity in scientific and pathological terms.[3] When Ellen Forney depicts the scene of diagnosis in her memoir *Marbles*, she quotes at length from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)*, filling her pages with this medical language in a manner that completely disrupts the pattern of storytelling in previous or subsequent panel sequences. Here the oracular voice of medicine dominates arthrological patterns of connection between panels; the reader is encouraged to create meaning in medical terms through linkages between the various words, images, and actions depicted in the panels in the sequence. As well, in both *Marbles* and *Dumb*, the *DSM* and/or the voice of a doctor create important intertexts to both specific medical textbooks and to the discourse of medicine itself, thus creating an architextual connection—at least momentarily—between these texts and other narratives of medical trauma. In *Dumb*, Webber concludes her first issue with a section entitled, in red ink, "diagnosis." The image accompanying this title is of Webber sitting in front of a bronchoscope machine, and the subsequent panels allow the young male doctor to explain Webber's disabling condition. Webber accompanies this explanation with images borrowed from a medical textbook, including one specific image that reveals a cross-section of her own upper body, showing how the bronchoscope is fed down her throat.

Within disability studies, such images are quite recognizable, as one of the key visual frames for disability has been medical or pathological. This framing is best exemplified by the medical textbook itself, wherein disabled bodies are cropped, dissected, their "defective" parts put on display for the education of the viewer, their subjectivity removed. These images train medical professionals to gaze at people with disabilities in a similarly objective manner, focusing on their defects and limiting their subjectivity and agency. Thus *any* image of disability asks to be looked at medically and pathologically. These images also serve as an emblem for the medical model of disability, a model in which disability can only be understood as a natural aberration, in need of therapeutic or surgical intervention, cure, or eradication. This model offers very little space for living with disability, for understanding the role of culture and society in dictating the terms of disability; this model funnels narratives of disability toward either kill or cure. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Webber (and Forney) temporarily gives the graphic narrative over to the medical model and framing of disability, or that this medical model brings with it its own multimodal and intertextual grammars that likewise dominate.

After she has been told to rest her voice over the coming months, the issue ends with a full-page image of Georgia standing, coat in her right hand and instructions from her doctor in her left hand, a lost, defeated expression on her face. The reader is here mimicking the role of the doctor in examining Georgia. However, so too has she depicted herself as staring back at the reader, challenging the practice of staring at people with disabilities. As Garland-Thomson (or others, like Ann Millett) would argue, medicalized images of disability, like those used by Webber in her "diagnosis" section, invite or sanction staring (see Garland-Thomson, *Staring*). In *Dumb*, the viewer is invited to actually become bronchoscopic. Yet as Millett argues, "the gaze/stare is inevitably embodied and transforming to subjects on both sides of it" (n.p.). In this spirit of reversal, or at least channeling the dual trajectory of any stare, to end the first issue, Webber draws herself engaged in what Frederik Byrn-Køhlert has called the "counter-stare," staged as a way to resist the gaze that has too often constructed people with disabilities as passive, medicalized subjects. Even through her evident distress at the diagnosis, Webber uses the counter-stare to assert her own agency, both to act and to represent herself.

In this image, we see arranged around Georgia's upper body overlapping red circles, already associated with sound/voice, but here depicted as empty, the internalization of sound/voice that, for her, is to come in the remainder of the series. For readers familiar with comics, the red circles will also suggest the convention of the thought balloon, in which a series of circles leading to a word balloon are used to designate that the thoughts, rather than the speech, of a character are being represented. Since she cannot speak, her "voice" becomes internalized and attached to her thoughts, especially as she finds alternative ways to express herself. While the color red will still be used to indicate external sounds (such as the voices of other people) as the series moves forward, so too will red be used to make manifest this internalized voice.[4] That is, as readers encounter the red of this internal voice (as will be seen in the next example), they will make arthrological connections back to this final image from Issue 1 in which Webber begins to tease out this internalized voice.

In all drawings of Georgia, she has close-cropped hair, with her bangs cut straight across the top of her forehead. Her clothes are generally plain (jeans or a skirt, a white shirt with or without sleeves), and she is often depicted wearing boots. Webber depicts herself as a line drawing in black ink, and this accentuates the features on her face and her gestures, which are the only noticeable elements of her appearance that change from frame to frame. Thus the reader learns to "read" these facial and bodily changes, and also to place great emphasis on the presence (and absence) of other markers.

Through multiple modes—the gestural depiction of her body language and facial expression, the visual use of the iconography of both the color red and the circles of the thought balloon, the spatial layout of these elements on the page, and, notably, the absence of both linguistic and audio markers—Webber establishes control of her own self-representation on the comics page. As Sarah Birge writes, "Comics can depict combinations of motor, sensory, emotional, social and cognitive factors affecting a person, thereby avoiding the reduction of that person to a stereotype" (n.p.). Through the affordances of the medium of comics, Webber has Georgia stare back at the reader, asserting that her identity (both in the comic and in real life) is beyond stereotype.

Splitting and "crip time"

In Issue 2 of the series, readers are invited to enter Webber's new "normal" and make meaning from her representations of it. The first section of the issue, appropriately titled "aftermath," opens with a small panel that shows Georgia from the shoulders up, surrounded by overlapping red circles; this panel makes a direct arthrological connection to the final panel of the Issue 1, making the reader remember that panel and make connections between it and this opening panel. This kind of arthrological connection pushes readers to make meaning from the sequence that follows in light of the meanings they derived from the earlier panel, just as it pushes readers to reassess the meaning of the previous panel in light of this sequence. On the facing page, we see an image of Georgia walking tentatively to the left, a paratextual and extra-diegetic interlude that precedes the beginning of the narrative, from which she seems to be walking away. What's more, she is drawn in red rather than in the black lines that have been used for all previous images of people. How is the reader to make sense of this image? How does it connect to the narrative? To Webber's representation of self? While readers will certainly begin to establish such meanings at this point, as the narrative proceeds, the import of this image will become clear through arthrological linkages to repeated panels in the "splitting" section of Issue 2. It is in this sequence that Webber really begins her attempt to deconstruct disability by "demonstrating the pathology and psychic impairment within the seemingly productive art of comic book writing" (Squier 88). The red-penciled Georgia is but one articulation of self, and in "splitting," Webber endeavors to come to terms with how she is to manage these multiple selves.

In "splitting," Webber takes advantage of the possibility in the comics medium of articulating multiple narratives simultaneously. Along the bottom of the 11 pages that make up this section, Webber utilizes three panels per page to tell the story of the tasks she must perform in order to best engage her new situation: quitting her job at the café, telling friends, applying for other jobs, requesting emergency financial aid, registering as temporarily disabled, applying for welfare, and requesting a higher credit limit. As Webber shows through these 33 panels, the process is clearly exhausting, but she does end with a panel that shows a hand attaching a note to the wall next to her computer which reads, "it's going to be okay." Parallel to this narrative, the upper two-thirds of each page are taken up with a series of unbordered panels in which Georgia is shown to be wrestling with her divided self. On pages 3 and 4 of the "splitting" section, we see the initial process of separation in which the red-penciled version of Georgia is shown to emerge from the drawing of Georgia done in black, a representation in keeping with the way she has been drawn throughout the comic to this point. As readers encounter this image of two Georgias, they will (or at least could) make connections back to the way the color red was linked to sound in Issue 1, the red circles of the final page of that issue (as discussed earlier), and the earlier depiction of this image in the paratext to this issue (and its proximate association with the first panel of "aftermath"). All of these connections push readers to see the ensuing conflict between these two versions of Georgia in terms of silence (her new normal) versus sound (the voice that fights to be released, even though such release would be detrimental to physical recovery). Moreover, this conflict literally plays out on top of the life events depicted in the bottom panels so that as readers move through these parallel narratives, they are forced to think about the relationship between them. When the fight ends in an image of the black-penciled version of Georgia helping up the red-penciled version, the image is accompanied by "it's going to be okay," the words that appear in the final panel of the other narrative. Despite this image and these words, however, it is an uneasy peace, an articulation of selves that is stable only for the moment and subject to further reinterpretations as Webber moves through her story.

Importantly, in this section Webber begins to reclaim some of the agency to dictate disability within her own terms, agency seemingly ceded to the doctor in Issue 1 (as seen above). Webber not only begins her own (admittedly medicalized) research into her disabling condition, but she also begins to negotiate the social and cultural forces of disability in contemporary society, from navigating disability support systems and accommodations at school and work (researching "silent jobs" for instance), to managing the impressions of friends and family ("warn friends" heads a list of tasks). The use of lists and notes to herself in this issue allows the reader to recognize how Georgia is taking control of her own life, managing disabling and enabling factors that are socially and culturally constructed. The lists are a means of splitting her days into tasks. Webber not only represents splits in her sense of herself (an image to which she will return with the dual red- and black-penciled versions of Georgia, most notably in Issue 5), but she also splits her disability into discrete economic, relational, and medical units.

Webber shows that many of these tasks and much of this splitting are frustrating and difficult, set not in dream time or the idealized and empowering chronology of the montage, but in what Ellen Samuels calls "crip time"—sometimes this is "grief time," time of "loss and its crushing undertow" (n.p.). In presenting "crip time," Webber is able to take advantage of the affordances of the comics form in which time is always represented visually, spatially, and materially, in specific sequences, in the comic as a whole, and, in this case, in the serial form itself. When, in Issue 2, an older man (presumably a counselor or social worker) tells Webber, "okay so you are temporarily disabled," Webber's life now begins to map out across "crip time." At other points a sense of "crip time" reveals how social structures drain the time and energy of people with disabilities, as when Webber is repeatedly refused economic support from service agencies and banks. In one particularly arresting two-page spread from Issue 5, Webber creates a series of steps that repeat over and over, in a way that takes advantage of both arthrology and page layout. The sequence starts and stops and starts over on different parts of the page, confusing the left-to-right, top-to-bottom scanning of the page, and then draws piles of paperwork laid out across the entire bottom of the two-page spread to show how much time must be invested—and physically, how many forms must be filled out—to even get an appointment to apply for social assistance.

The point or the effect of narrating these events multimodally is to physically reveal, across panels, that disability *takes time*, doesn't move easily toward resolution, accommodation, cure or rehabilitation. More often, bodies are moved sideways and backwards, as when we see Webber approaching a service desk and then turning away, dejected, in the next frame. As Jonas Engelmann has argued, in disability graphic narrative, "the limitation of the panels [can] express the restriction caused by [disability or] disease" (57). In fact, throughout the comic from the moment of diagnosis on (including in the section on "splitting" discussed above), Webber reveals how these temporal and spatial restrictions are at least in part socially and culturally created, as well as the ways that people experiencing disability can find or invent their own agency and order within these restrictions. Moreover, "crip time," as Webber depicts it, occurs serially, divided into separate issues that represent chapters in a life as it unfolds rather than a retrospective narrative of disability such as David Small's *Stitches*. In presenting the reader with chapters released periodically in real time, Webber has built in a mechanism for continually reinventing the representation of both herself and her experience of "crip time," while also relying on a serial structure that resists the pull and closure of disability myths/tropes such as compensation and/or cure. That is, in addition to working in the comics form in which space comes to stand in for time, the very act of working in the serial comic book form allows Webber to play with time and representation and the ways in which they are imbricated with each other. “Crip time,” then, becomes a key disability rhetoric in *Dumb*, a means of generating meaning *from* disability, rather than simply overlaying meanings upon the disabled body.

Codes

Just as Webber uses the affordances of the comic book medium to slow down and speed up the temporality of the form to mirror and invoke “crip time,” and just as she has developed a color-coded language, using a seemingly simple combination of red, black, and white space to connote issues as complex as the splitting of the self, she also narrates how a color code became part of her own “real-life” communication strategy. In this way, another key disability rhetoric within *Dumb* and within Webber’s own life is the multimodal generation of communicative meaning, meaning developed aside from speech, meaning developed not in spite of disability or to compensate for it but developed from and through disability.

The first section of Issue 4, entitled “the code,” ends with an image of Georgia pointing at her own red lips, a word balloon with gaps (signifying that she is whispering) above her head which reads, “... but it’s still a negotiation every day.” She explains, through an image early in the section of her posting on social media, that there is a “new code in effect. Lipstick = I am not talking at all. No lipstick = I will talk a little, if needed”; the front of Webber’s business card utilizes the same image of her pointing to her red lips, the white and black image next to the words “when I’m wearing red lipstick it means I’m resting my voice” overlaid on a red background. The red of her lipstick, a color used throughout to represent both voice and sound, becomes a coded way for Georgia/Webber to reclaim agency over that voice. We already know that she has been counseled by her doctor to rest her damaged vocal chords, and the “code,” seemingly, will allow her to protect her voice, but also to manage the expectations of others. She has moved from “warning friends” about her disability, to dictating a system for interacting with others. The “code” draws the reader’s attention to two specific, but often taken-for-granted, features of discourse: first, that it is co-constructed, collaborative, dialogic; and second, that it is assumed we can all speak—fluency is the default—so when someone can't speak clearly and fluently, the onus is on them to begin to entirely renegotiate the social sphere. These features are called to the readers' attention *because* Georgia is beginning to navigate life—and Webber is beginning to reshape a comic—in the absence of her own vocalized speech.[5]

Immediately after posting her new code on social media, Georgia begins to second-guess herself, beginning with the next page which features a sequence of panels in which she puts on lipstick and then smiles at the image of her in a belted dress in a full-length mirror. In the first panel of three in the page's bottom tier, however, Webber depicts Georgia frowning and looking down and to the right of the panel. Readers will assume that something is amiss, a supposition that is confirmed by the next two panels that show Georgia wiping her mouth and discarding the red-smeared tissue. The next page shows her changing back into shorts and a t-shirt, the unbordered panel of her looking at her reflection once more effectively mirroring the earlier panel of self-gaze. The page ends with two images of Georgia surrounded by question marks, while the reveal on the following page depicts Georgia on the far right of a page-wide panel, writing furiously in her notebook. Below, in the bottom two-thirds of the page, is reproduced this page. On it she has written,

> as if being a silent woman isn't fraught / <u>enough</u>, the addition of lipstick is ... / disturbing. / then what? I'm just decoration? / smiling, quiet, made up / am i reversing something? / SHIT why didn't i study this stuff? / what do i even believe? / start at the beginning / or maybe in the / middle, the center (n.p.)

The code, she has come to realize, is not as straightforward as she first imagined.

Over the next two pages, Webber uses a collage technique as a multimodal way of navigating and exploring this doubt. In the second of these collages, Webber has layered images of femininity from old magazines, bright red mouths, a naked female body, the heads of feminist heroes, and snippets of text to show that while the "code" is designed as "a signal, a tool," she worries that lipstick itself is a symbol of female objectification. In working in the medium of collage in this way, Webber is able to make a number of external linkages through which the reader can make meaning from the page and, like her, think through the multiple issues that are wrapped up in her new code. For example, the DIY nature of collage makes an architextual link to zine culture, especially that which is associated with third-wave feminism; such an association is mutually reinforced by the physical form of the comic book itself, a handmade, DIY object. The photographs depict recognizable women, including Rosa Parks, Frida Kahlo, Yoko Ono, Angela Davis, and Ella Fitzgerald. As readers, we make linkages to the texts of their lives and their connections to feminisms and try to see the ways in which what we know of them might help us to make meaning within *Dumb*. Finally, collage always works hypertextually, as it is a kind of remix in which all of the elements are repurposed. All of the original texts from which the images, words, and symbols come are individually and collectively modified as readers consider their connections to each other in this new text. Readers may or may not understand these connections, but they are available as possible ways of making meaning from these pages. These two pages, then, represent Webber working through and presenting to the reader the variety of issues that surround her new code. As is their nature, the collaged pages represent more questions than answers, but they are nevertheless an important way of articulating her thought processes using some of the multimodal means at her disposal.

Webber ends the section by concluding, "doing what is best for me is the most feminist I can be / those who care about me will adjust. The rest will have to stay out of my way ... but it's still a negotiation every day" (n.p.). The rest of this issue explores the ups and downs of these negotiations, narrating a connection and then break-up with a potential partner who, Georgia worries, might like her better because she is quiet or silent. It is clear that while the issue began with Georgia making a confident statement about her communicative rules, *Dumb* also shows how for many people with disabilities, the codes of normativity themselves can be terrifically difficult, sometimes inscrutable, cutting across norms of gender and sexuality. In this way, "codes" refer not just to the intertextual and multimodal means that Webber develops to narrate her own life, but also the codes of ableism that are reshaping her experience.

In creating *Dumb*, Webber has developed a prosthesis through which she can not only resist the disability narratives which have been imposed upon her, but also experiment with self-representation of her own identity as someone with a disability. Webber utilizes the affordances of a serialized comic book, capitalizing on not only the multimodality of the medium and the meanings created through both arthrological and transtextual connections in it, but also on the serial nature of the comic book and the physicality of the comic book as object. She moves disability beyond the medical model, she develops innovative chronological and spatial rhetorics through "crip time" and the splitting of her identities, she lays bare the interdependence and imperfection of all discourse through her "code," and she places disability within larger, contested cultural spheres, interacting with ongoing conversations about gender and sexuality through strategies such as collage. *Dumb* is not just an arena for negotiating with and around disability. *Dumb* is a heuristic for *communicating with* and through disability.

Notes

1. Within disability studies, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder have developed the concept of "narrative prosthesis," a term "meant to indicate that disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight" (49). Yet here and in the remainder of the essay, we refer to prosthesis not in this negative sense, but as a way to understand that all rhetorical acts require prostheses, as they all issue forth from and reach into imperfect bodies. Recognizing where the prosthetic relationships lie within a text can allow us to amplify their rhetorical power, rather than to reduce them to easy tropes. For instance, it could be said that comics themselves are particularly prosthetic, offering writers and audiences multiple "devices" for accessing meaning in any single frame as well as all the way across graphic narratives.
2. In order to differentiate between the character and the cartoonist, when writing about the character we have used "Georgia" and in writing about the cartoonist we have used "Webber."
3. Ablesplaining has been used to describe the ways that disability gets confidently explained and defined by people who have no experience of the disability. In fact, ablesplaining also encapsulates the fact that most people with disabilities are not seen as authorities about their own minds and bodies.
4. Red will also be used—importantly—to signify or wrestle with the feeling and signification of pain. Early in the "paperwork" section of Issue 5, Webber depicts multiple iterations of the pain of her throat. She does so by depicting herself in two unbordered panels at her drawing table, the action implied by

both the sequential nature of the two panels and by the multiple positionings of her hands in the second panel. In the upper-left corner, Webber has written in gray ink, "what does it feel like?" (n.p.). Arrayed around these panels are seven attempts at the representation of vocal pain; all of these depictions are done in gray tones to show their provisional nature, but all have in common the use of the color red to signify both sound and its equivalence to pain. The reader makes meaning from these two pages of self-representation through the linguistic (the words "what does it feel like?"), the visual (the depictions of her drawing and the imputed results of that drawing, done in gray ink), the gestural (the pain seen in many of Georgia's faces that are shown), the spatial (in the way they are arrayed around the act of drawing), and the audio (in its lack of representation except for the color red which here stands for both sound and pain).

5. Webber's speech *loss* is also narrated through a sort of multimodal, intertextual, expressive "gain." This in some way might mirror the concept, in the Deaf community, of "deaf gain." This has become a way to reposition deafness as a positive identity, and Deaf people as a culture and community, not as people experiencing "hearing loss."

Works cited

Birge, Sarah. "No Life Lessons Here: Comics, Autism, and Empathetic Scholarship." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30.1 (2010): n.p. Web.

Byrn-Køhlert, Frederik. "Embattled Subjectivities: Illness and Disability in Autobiographical Comics." Canadian Society for the Study of Comics Conference. Toronto, Ontario. 9 May 2014. Presentation.

Carpenter, Rick. "Disability as Socio-Rhetorical Action: Towards a Genre-Based Approach." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 31.3 (2011): n.p. Web.

Chute, Hilary. "Comics Form and Narrating Lives." *Profession* (2011): 107–17.

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-IV-TR. 4th ed. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2000.

Dolmage, Jay, and Dale Jacobs. "Difficult Articulations: Comics Autobiography, Trauma, and Disability." In *The Future of Text and Image*. Ed. Ofra Omahay and Lauren Walsh. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholar's Press, 2012. 69–92.

Engelmann, Jonas. "Picture This: Disease and Autobiographic Narration." In *Comics as a Nexus of Cultures: Essays on the Interplay of Media, Disciplines and International Perspectives*. Ed. Mark Berninger, Jochen Ecke, and Gideon Haberkorn. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010. 45–59.

Forney, Ellen. *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me: A Graphic Memoir*. New York: Gotham, 2012.

Gardner, Jared. "Autography's Biography, 1972–2007." *Biography* 31.1 (2008): 1–26.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "The New Disability Studies: Inclusion or Tolerance?" *Association of Departments of English Bulletin* 124 (Winter 1999): 18–22.

——— *Staring: How We Look*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

Genette, Gerard. *Narrative Discourse*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980.

Green, Michael J. "Teaching with Comics: A Course for Fourth-Year Medical Students." *Journal of Medical Humanities* 34.4 (2013): 471–6.

Groensteen, Thierry. *The System of Comics*. Trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007.

Jacobs, Dale. *Graphic Encounters: Comics and the Sponsorship of Multi-Modal Literacy*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.

Johnson, Jeffrey K. "The Visualization of the Twisted Tongue: Portrayals of Stuttering in Film, Television, and Comic Books." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 41 (2008): 245–61.

Millett, Ann. "Staring Back and Forth." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 28.3 (2008): n.p. Web.

Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependence of Discourse*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001.

Rain Man. Dir. Barry Levinson. Perf. Dustin Hoffman, Tom Cruise. Los Angeles: Sony, 1988. DVD.

Samuels, Ellen. "Passing, Coming Out, and Other Magical Acts." Disability Disclosure Conference Keynote. University of Delaware. 27 October 2013.

Small, David. *Stitches*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2009.

Squier, Susan M. "So Long as They Grow Out of It: Comics, the Discourse of Developmental Normalcy, and Disability." *Journal of Medical Humanities* 29 (2008): 71–88.

Vaccarella, Maria. "Exploring Graphic Pathographies in the Medical Humanities." *Medical Humanities* 39.1 (2013): 70–1.

Webber, Georgia. *Dumb* 1–5. Web.

Whitlock, Gillian. "Autographics: The Seeing 'I' of the Comics." *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.4 (2006): 965–79.

2

“When you have no voice, you don’t exist”?: Envisioning Disability in David Small’s *Stitches*

Christina Maria Koch

The evolution of American autobiographical comics over the past decades has been increasingly accompanied by a strong trend toward subject matters of illness, disability, or more generally any physical or psychological traits perceived as deviations from the norm. As such, the popular form of “graphic memoir”[1] is more and more linked to the history of literary illness narratives, and sometimes relabeled “graphic pathography” (Green and Myers). Ian Williams has aptly characterized graphic pathographies as “the intellectual, emotional and manual act of somatic self-expression” (“Portrayal” 74). Elisabeth El Refaie, among others,[2] has shown that “picturing embodied selves” (*Autobiographical* 49) is, in fact, one of the central concerns in graphic memoirs altogether. She very instructively explains that comics artists producing autobiographical work are “in the unusual position of having to visually portray themselves over and over again [and are, thus,] constantly compelled to engage with their physical identities” (*Autobiographical* 62). In other words, the necessary continuous repetition of the cartoonist’s avatar on the page is enough to raise issues of embodiment in graphic memoirs in general, and these are even more strongly foregrounded in graphic pathographies. Obviously, many of these narratives engage not only with primarily somatic but also with psychological ailments. This does not lessen the significance of graphic embodiment: the visual-verbal medium of comics is particularly apt in showing how intricately mental states are bound up with lived bodily experience and an embodied sense of self. Lastly, the established rise of illness narratives in the form of graphic narratives also calls attention to the complex relation of comics and disability. José Alaniz has reminded us of the invisibility of disability during the Golden Age of superheroes and their invincible, unfailing bodies, and he has illuminated the parallels to narratives of "supercrips," the ever-inspiring public figures who overcome their impairments with seemingly superhuman strength (31).[3] Susan Squier, focusing on more current alternative graphic narratives, convincingly argues that "as a medium combining verbal and gestural expression, comics can convey the complex social impact of a physical or mental impairment, as well as the way the body registers social and institutional constraints" (74).

David Small's highly acclaimed 2009 graphic narrative *Stitches: A Memoir* is an example of a comics autobiography that deals with the medicalized body as well as the social norms and constraints of embodiment, one that can be read both as illness narrative and as disability memoir. The plot revolves around the young protagonist David's experience of growing up in a cold, dysfunctional family environment in the 1950s/1960s and of losing his voice after a tumor surgery, which drastically impacts his sense of self. Also, David accidentally discovers that his tumor had been cancerous. His father, a radiologist, later confesses that his x-ray "treatments" of David's sinus problems had caused the cancer. At first, David's impairment seems permanent, but he is able to overcome it with the help of speech therapy. David's emotional strain is relieved through psychological therapy and, eventually, by attending art school.[4] David's inability to speak is mirrored by his traumatic childhood, which is marked by secrets, miscommunications, and silences. This prompts the narrative's central aesthetic features: A large number of pages or panels of *Stitches* are "silent," and the characters' eyes are markedly foregrounded. The narrative silence allows the reader, in an apparent paradox, to "*see* the painful inexpressibility" of David's plight (Vågnes 305). Øyvind Vågnes spots a parallel here to Small's previous work as an illustrator of children's books (303), but Small's particular artistic style is also in many ways reminiscent of cinematic storytelling.[5] The common absence of text boxes and elaborate speech bubbles goes hand in hand with the frequent portrayal of characters, especially the protagonist, engaged in visual perception, imagination, visual memory, or visual communication.

David experiences his speech impairment as a debilitating lack and absence. Consider his poignant evaluation of the social implications of not being able to speak, of the actually *disabling* dimension of his impairment: returning to school after the surgery, the narrative voice tells us he was "wildly self-conscious," only to learn very soon that "when you have no voice, you don't exist" (Small, *Stitches* 212). In the three panels on this page, David gradually fades to be finally a mere outline of a white figure, a "visual void" that is nevertheless the "focal point of the image" (El Refaie, "Of Men" 64). Belying rationalist, individualist notions of selfhood, David's existence seems to be meaningful only when it is socially recognized. Small's drawings, then, render the feeling of being "invisible" (*Stitches* 213) visible again. Aesthetically, the narrative thus links the auditory dimension of speech, or the lack thereof, to visuality or visibility. Visibility is thematized aesthetically in depictions of visual perception, and metaphorically as one of the widespread social responses to disability: in W. J. T. Mitchell's view, the "[h]ypervisibility" of a deviation from the norm coincides with the "invisibility" and anxious public erasing of disability (qtd. in Alaniz 35). David's forced silence is foiled, however, by a strong visual presence in the depiction of his acute capacity of making sense of the world visually, as well as his ability to communicate and express resistance with his eyes. Readers are frequently confronted with David's parents' hard and angry looks as well as David's defiant scowl, stare, or inquiring eye in, for instance, reverse-shot or mirror image panels. In the following, I will focus on how visuality in general and practices of looking in particular are depicted and employed in *Stitches*. I seek to move beyond an exploration of individual trauma narration toward the representation of the social context of disability.

The cultural framings of disability and of illness have a fraught relationship. Diane Price Herndl has observed that "most people in the disability community do not want to be considered ill, and most people who are ill don't want to be considered disabled" (593). Similarly, she identifies a rift between two fields of study: the medical humanities with its rather "medicalized" (594) view of the body and disability studies with its tradition of privileging the social over the somatic: "disability is not something a person possesses, but something one encounters," as Price Herndl describes it (593). Small's memoir engages with and complicates this social model of disability, a way of thinking that has enabled activists and scholars alike to expose the social norms and constraints constructing disability.[6] In line with this model, David has a speech *impairment* that can mostly be explained by medical causes, but it is his social environment that *disables* his ability to express himself. The social model has since been criticized for relegating impairment to a pre-social, pre-discursive realm and thus, ironically, "*remedicaliz[ing]* much of the experience of disability," as Squier explains (74). Squier accordingly follows Bill Hughes's call to focus on and re-socialize the physical experience of disability in what she calls a "socio-somatic model" (74).[7] David Small's graphic memoir seems to illustrate this point: David's impairment cannot be contained within the biomedical sphere. Once seemingly permanent, it is eventually alleviated through vocal exercises, and this development is portrayed hand in hand with David's growing independence of the disabling aspects of his environment. This might bring to mind David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder's seminal critique of the familiar way of making disability a metaphorical literary device to give a concrete body to an abstract type of suffering (Orbán 180). Yet Scott St. Pierre argues that *Stitches* also "explore[s] the materiality of that metaphor" and thus shows that a metaphorical rendition complemented by the portrayal of physical experience does not have to be harmful.[8] That being said, *Stitches* is still, in G. Thomas Couser's sense, a narrative of bodily and mental triumph that probably does not reflect the majority of lived disability experiences (33–4). Astrid Böger, for instance, calls the work a "drawing cure" or an "effort at graphic healing" (605, 614). Yet, Small's graphic memoir also largely avoids both what Arthur Frank has identified as a "quest narrative" wherein illness serves as a spiritual journey and the trappings of a "restitution narrative," primarily since David's coming of age (interwoven with his history of illness and disability) prevents any restitution to a previous, unaffected state.

Disability, however, has not been the primary focus of critics working on *Stitches*. There is an understandably strong interest in trauma—Vågnes, Böger, Ariela Freedman, Ilana Larkin, and Leigh Gilmore and Elizabeth Marshall have taken this path, although not exclusively. El Refaie's approach, to which I am particularly indebted, centers on illness and embodiment. In a recent book chapter, Laura McGavin reads *Stitches* with a post-humanist approach as a graphic cancer pathography in which "inside-out visual motifs" depict a fragmented, "unbounded cancerous bod[y]" (190). Finally, in an article that generally has a rather formal aesthetic focus, Katalin Orbán explicitly engages with disability and quotes the aforementioned review of *Stitches* by St. Pierre in a 2009 issue of the *Disability Studies Quarterly*. The lack of a clear-cut categorization is not surprising. More so than other graphic pathographies, *Stitches* interlaces trauma, illness, and disability to an extent that is hard to disentangle: consider the recurring images of not only David's medical experience with (ignored) symptoms, (wrong) diagnoses, and (damaging) therapies at the hands of his own father, but also the space of the medical profession and its equipment, particularly the imaging device of the x-ray machine.

In Small's work, the x-ray is pitted against the involuntary patient's visual and by implication cognitive perspective—aesthetically and on the level of content. In her extensive study on medical visualizations of the body, Lisa Cartwright has pointed out that the x-ray is "an extreme example of a technique that renders its viewing subject an object of a pervasive disciplinary gaze—a truly radiant gaze—that threatens to perform a quite literal disintegration of the body" (108). She adds that part of the iconographic appeal of the technique has been its proximity to "the metaphors of blinding natural light and penetrating vision so often evoked in the 'great man' approach to science history" (111). In *Stitches*, almost as a direct reference, we are presented with a deeply ironic portrayal of David's father and his son's view of the medical profession (El Refaie, "Of Men" 60). When David, his brother, and his mother visit the radiologists' workplace in the hospital, the father's and his colleagues' faces are caricatures of the cold-blooded, emotionally distant physician or scientist (Small, *Stitches* 26).[9] The "soldiers of science" who are "piercing the unknown" in young David's imagination (27) prove to be not the all-American (and all-male) heroes on a quest for scientific knowledge, but essentially engaged in a form of child abuse. Orbán comments that "[t]his quietly lethal ambition of penetrating vision is also echoed in the ubiquitous prosthesis of spectacles" (176)—in fact, every member of David's family (including his maternal grandparents) wears glasses.[10] Very often, they are depicted as "eyeless blank lenses" which foreground David's vulnerable body on permanent display as a "permeable epidermal borderline" (Orbán 176). Also, the obscured eyes have the aesthetic effect of heightening the reader's awareness of David's visual perspective. Quite early in the book, the delicate features of the young protagonist are juxtaposed with his father's intimidating x-ray equipment (see Figure 2). On a single page, the reader

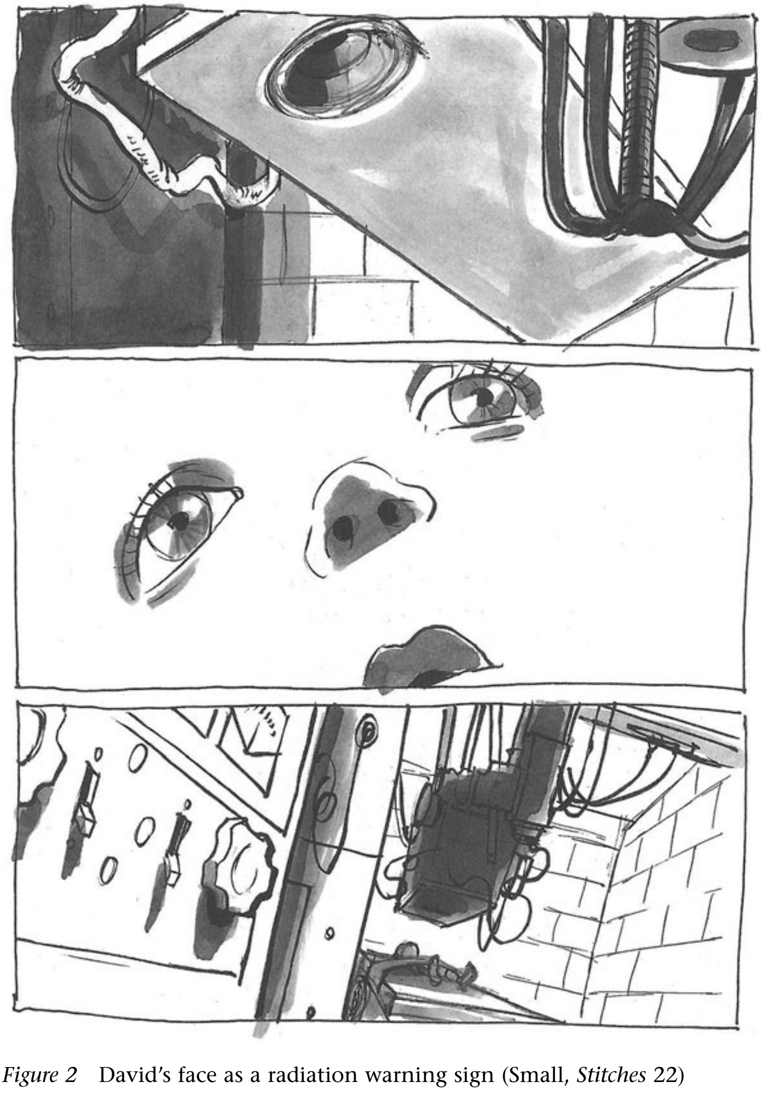


Figure 2 David's face as a radiation warning sign (Small, *Stitches* 22)

adopts three perspectives: one approximating David's view, another portraying the machine's angle of vision, and a final take from a safe distance, namely, the radiologist supervising the equipment that towers over the strapped-down, unruly body of his patient. The depiction of David's innocent and anxious face, simplified to only contain eyes, nose, and mouth, forms a radiation warning sign as a silent commentary on the physical harm this alleged treatment is causing to an unsuspecting child. And again, piercing vision follows David later on. An anthropomorphized camera for which David is asked to perform a smile resembles the x-ray apparatus, and he duly covers up the cancerous lump on his throat that has formed by now, unwilling to grant access to his body for yet another visual intruder (Small, *Stitches* 128).

Since nothing is ever truly explained to David, not condescendingly and certainly not respectfully, he has his own ways of making sense of the experiences of illness. As readers, we often literally share David's vantage point and are offered visualizations of his vivid imaginations.[11] *Stitches* is a prime example of the autobiographical comics artist's split between observer and observed—an invitation to see the world through David's eyes takes turns with an objectified self that reflects an internal self-image, as Charles Hatfield notes (114–17). Hatfield's deliberation of "the self as successive selves" (117) brings to mind El Refaie's aforementioned observation about the continuous repetition of the cartoonist's avatar, of "picturing embodied selves." Jared Gardner has observed frequent cases of metafictional self-reflexivity in autobiographical comics—for instance portraying the act of drawing the given comic book. In *Stitches*, Small repeatedly alludes to the power that literature and art possess for him as a child and also portrays young David drawing and imagining his cartoon characters coming to life (Böger 610). Gardner posits that the foregrounded split between "autographer and subject" allows "the autographer to be both victim of the trauma and detached observer" (12).[12] This can, of course, also be achieved by allowing the "narrating I" in text boxes to verbally comment on past events that are simultaneously visually reenacted by an "experiencing I" in the panel (El Refaie, *Autobiographical* 53; Mikkonen, "Focalization"). By these means, the cartoonist can decide just how much "temporal and moral self-distancing" (El Refaie, "Of Men" 59) is needed between the illness and the present-day self of the narrative voice. In *Stitches*, this form of protective distance is only carefully and sparsely evoked. Long sequences of the narrative, if they are not wordless altogether, do without any text boxes. Hence, the spotlight is on the troubles of David growing up, not so much on the evaluative later autobiographical narrative voice. The careful construction of focalization, of selecting and limiting narrative information to the protagonist, is then largely achieved by visual aesthetic means—*mise-en-scène* or staging, point of view and field of vision, drawing style, panel structures, and page layout.[13]

Consider a scene rather early in the book, when David as a young boy strays in the hospital and is horrified by the discovery of a preserved fetus in a jar, which he then imagines to come alive and haunt him (Small, *Stitches* 38–40). Here, as in countless other panels and pages, David's eyes are the visual focus. In shot-and-reverse-shot panels, readers share the transition from an objectified perception to a subjective imagination of this uncanny figure (39). A few years later, David is shown in front of a mirror, helplessly contemplating the growth on his neck that his parents have yet to get medically examined (147). He imagines the same fetus growing inside it, a depiction El Refaie convincingly relates to Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject as found in the liminal and the monstrous, and that which "both repels and fascinates" (*Autobiographical* 69). She argues that "[b]y representing the most terrifying of his past body images in his drawings, David Small can thus be seen as retrospectively exorcizing his own worst fears, as well as perhaps allowing his readers to do the same" (69). Crucially, and not further specified by El Refaie, the monstrous fetus from David's hospital excursion exhibits a frown and scowl very similar to David's frequent expressions as a teenager later in the narrative. In looking directly at David in his imagination, it also directly looks at the reader. Stephan Packard has commented on the expressiveness of eyes in many graphic narratives, and has read the frequent depictions of practices of looking as a gateway for the reader's process of recognizing the self in the Other (127). Even without a psychoanalytical bent or a reception-oriented reading, we cannot but note the high degree of expressiveness that Small attributes particularly to the protagonist's face, whether it is David's younger self (El Refaie, "Of Men" 61) or his adolescent scowl, which effectively mirrors his parents' expressions.

As mentioned above, besides visualizing imagination, Small also frequently depicts visual communication. Between David and his parents, angry stares and scowls are the norm rather than the exception. Staring, incidentally, is a practice that has a long history in the cultural response to visible impairments—from "freak shows" in which staring is invited to the uninvited stares of passersby that many people with disabilities encounter on a daily basis. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has most conclusively analyzed the "politics of staring." She argues that we often stare at the novel and the unfamiliar in an "interrogative gesture," demanding information, as in the case of stares at visibly impaired bodies in public space. This scopic practice, she concludes, "demands a response" and thus creates an "interpersonal relationship" (3). Torn between the desire to stare and the knowledge that one should not, staring can create embarrassment on both sides (5)—thus, it implicates the starer much more than the distant, objectifying gaze (9–10). As Garland-Thomson continues to explain, the oft-cited primacy of vision in Western culture has roots in Ancient Greek culture, where the myth of Medusa and the power of her stare illustrates the double nature or uneasy potency of vision, later epitomized in transcultural superstitions about the "evil eye" (26). Staring, or the less intrusive gazing, has also been widely researched in social psychology studies on nonverbal human communication as the assertion of visual dominance (Knapp and Hall). How do we reconcile this with the kinds of stares we encounter in *Stitches*? David's speech impairment is invisible, indeed renders him invisible rather than a spectacle for others. His tumor and later his scar do attract attention, but can be hidden to some extent. Within his family, however, David's disability is very much on display. For his bespectacled parents, their stares are a way of probing their son's body and its differences, or deplorable "malfunctions," in a detached and analytical fashion. Simultaneously, the stares are an accusation, an expression of contempt for their view of David and his body as a troublemaker. Since they know "what's wrong," they stare at difference even though it is hardly visible, ever reminding the reader that David is shunned in his own home. Increasingly, however, David discovers the potential to resist and reverse the stare (see Millett; Køhlert). Since as readers we not only share David's but also frequently his parents' points of view, we are, to some extent, implicated and held accountable as well.

There are three particularly poignant moments in which the feeling of pain for the silence and secrecy that is so familiar to the reader through David's eyes is also granted to his parents, each with their individual secret burdens. They appear almost as tragic portraits amid the sequence of other images, offering a pause, since the depiction of the characters' faces and especially their eyes is significantly more detailed than usual. The first of these moments is David's accidental discovery of his mother in bed with another woman—a closeted homosexuality about which her glance at David seems to speak metaphorical volumes, yet her verbal silence remains (Small, *Stitches* 273). Later, when David as a young adult visits her on her dying bed, she is physically unable to speak because of tubes running through her throat, and a close-up on her teary eyes looking at David impart a subjectivity to her whose depth is unparalleled elsewhere in the narrative (307).[14] Then there is David's father, who finally musters the courage to confess his role in David's medical ordeal and tell him to his face that he "gave [him] cancer" (287).[15] What follows is a four-page sequence of David's initial reaction and his memory of the x-ray treatments. In this example, various aspects of my previous analysis resurface, suggesting an apt conclusion.

The first page shows David looking at his father (and the reader) in front of the river and factories of Detroit. A complex mix of emotions lies in David's stunned look. The dark shadow cast over the middle of his face could be produced by his father standing in front of him, but more likely it is a nonrealistic aesthetic device evoking metaphorically cast shadows—the shape of a crucifix (see 104), a Rorschach test or even the respective *Watchmen* character,[16] or the layered and blurry images of x-rays—and it faintly resembles the dreary factory smokestacks in the background. David's vulnerability is underscored by the visually foregrounded scar on his neck, an aesthetic emphasis we also find in other instances of the work.[17] This splash page is a point of access to David's memory as it is visualized on the ensuing pages. We are first transported back to a view of the x-ray machine as we have seen it in the very beginning of the narrative, and David's face is fragmented and distorted in three separate panels superimposed on the splash page (289). His father, a sketched figure wearing impenetrable glasses and a doctor's coat, is partially shielded by the apparatus and standing in a cone of light, which appears to be yet another ironic comment on the authority of 1950s medical professionals. On the next page, as David moves further back in time and inhabits his former self, three panels of his fragmented face, which are assembled at the bottom of a splash page that shows another angle of the x-ray machine, display David's younger self.

The perspective of the splash page is curious: the center of vision is at the level of the head of the table to which David is strapped, facing the top of his head and the wall, and the whole image is tilted sideways. Judging from only this page, David might as well be upright and our perspective a bird's-eye view. It is only in comparison with other images of the room and a knowledge of the x-ray apparatus that we can try to make sense of what is happening, and even then perspectives and states of affairs remain slanted and distorted. Together with the fragmentation of the three panels below, the image lets us conclude that what is happening does indeed not make sense—it was not understandable to David as a child, and it has now lost all its purported positive meaning with the father's confession. The individual malfunctioning body, surveyed from a distance by the authoritative physician, is visually and mentally compartmentalized and literally and symbolically fixated to the rules of the medical profession, yet ultimately eludes its grasp. The final page of this sequence of memory images (291) is an intericonic reference to what I have identified as the radiation warning sign in the early depictions of David's treatments (see Figure 2) in that his younger and older selves converge in a single face. The facial features of David's younger self, tilted so he looks upwards, are drawn onto his forehead and thus reference the physical locus of visual memory. While the act of remembering is still depicted, the reader is simultaneously transported back into the present situation of the stunned adolescent son looking at his father. On this page, David is silent still—he is portrayed without a mouth—but the depicted event is the catalyst prompting his move to a single apartment, his eventual departure to art school, and his journey to an independence of body and self.

In these few pages that mark the end of David's life with his family, Small invokes several visual aesthetic settings that characterize the entire graphic memoir. The narrative dramatizes the x-ray as a destructive technique of medical imaging and the intrusive and depersonalizing medical gaze. It negotiates the relation of visual perception, imagination, and memory (and cinematic as well as medium-specific ways to represent these processes) in a predominantly "silent" fashion. Lastly, the construction of narrative subjectivity is bound up with the representation of visual communication, and the politics of these intersubjective encounters are marked by efforts to return the gaze and stare back. *Stitches* thus finds aesthetic means to distinguish between impairment and disability and portray the injustice and harrowing experiences of David's illness and his disabling surroundings, while simultaneously expressing resistance and visually emphasizing the materiality of the individual embodied self implicated in cultural webs of significance.

Notes

1. See Jared Gardner and Astrid Böger for discussions of the term in the context of *Stitches*.
2. This already had been a concern of Will Eisner (see Squier 74) and Scott Bukatman in the context of superhero comics (see Alaniz 6).
3. I thank José Alaniz for kindly making parts of his monograph *Death, Disability and the Superhero* available to me prior to publication.
4. The narrative is, of course, also strongly influenced by the fact that David's social environment is white and middle-class (see El Refaie, "Of Men" 60).
5. The cinematic techniques Small employs in *Stitches* have been pointed out by critics and the author himself (see, for instance, Small, "From"; Pedler; Böger 612–13; and Vågnes 310). The stylistic tradition of American underground comics, still a common influence for other current graphic memoirs (see Hatfield and Gardner), seems to be rarely ever referenced aesthetically in *Stitches*.
6. For an overview of these traditions in disability studies and activism, see Squier; Faircloth; and Byrn-Køhlert's chapter "Staring at Comics: Disability in Al Davison's *The Spiral Cage*."
7. Michael Bérubé's plea to account more strongly for the lived, embodied reality of impairments or the fact that, in his terms, "there's a *there* there" (qtd. in Price Herndl 597) seems somewhat similar.
8. See Christine Marks for a discussion of metaphor and illness, particularly Susan Sontag's argument.
9. See Lilian R. Furst and Deborah Lupton, *Medicine*, for discussions of the complex mechanisms of power in doctor–patient relationships.
10. See Small, *Stitches* 105. Larkin offers a psychoanalytic reading of this phenomenon of "absent" versus highly expressive eyes. For El Refaie, the omnipresence of spectacles in *Stitches* signifies the unintelligibility of the parents' emotional states ("Of Men" 61). It may also remind us of the transfer of Michel Foucault's ideas on the surveillance system of the panopticon to the medical sphere and profession (see Lupton, "Foucault").
11. Ian Hague has put forth an instructive methodological argument in his recent book *Comics and the Senses*. He notes that "[s]cholars tend to see the page from what we might call an ideal perspective" (34). For reasons of practicability and consistency, we reductively assume to have *seen* the same given comic, simply not *read* the same, that is, constructed the same

meaning. The materiality of the work and contextual aspects of reading experience (not exclusively limited to reception studies, but also discernible in the formal aesthetic characteristics of the comic itself) tend to take a backseat.

12. See also Williams, "Medical Narrative" 26.
13. See Mikkonen, "Style"; "Focalization." In his approach to focalization in graphic narratives, Mikkonen also productively incorporates cinematic terms, for example types of "shots."
14. El Refaie comments that this "suddenly demands [the readers'] understanding for a hitherto remote and unsympathetic character" (*Autobiographical* 203), and Larkin convincingly argues that this "humanizing depiction" is used to signal "David's growth" and loss of fear (207).
15. Significantly, this verbal exchange between father and son occurs without a frontal view on the first. While the reader is made to share David's perspective as his mother is looking directly at him, the father's confession, "I gave you cancer" (287), and his wide-eyed look at David is shown from a slightly slanted point of view. Thus, the shot-reverse-shot sequence does not directly visually anticipate its powerful climax of the frontal view on David in the moment of the confession's impact (288).
16. Thanks to Houman Sadri and this volume's editors for calling my attention to this reference.
17. This happens most poignantly when David himself removes the bandages after his surgery and the wound appears visually for the first time (Vågnes 310; see also El Refaie, "Of Men" 63). The accompanying text, an imagined conversation with himself, highlights the extent to which David's brutal encounters with illness and the medical profession shape his sense of self: "'Surely this is not me.'—'No, friend, it surely is.'" (Small, *Stitches* 191).

Works cited

Alaniz, José. *Death, Disability and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014.

Böger, Astrid. "Conquering Silence: David Small's *Stitches* and the Art of Getting Better." *American Comic Books and Graphic Novels*. Spec. issue of *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 56.4 (2011): 603–16.

Byrn-Køhlert, Frederik. "Drawing in the Margins: Identity and Subjectivity in Contemporary Autobiographical Comics." Diss. University of Montréal, 2014.

Cartwright, Lisa. *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine's Visual Culture*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Couser, G. Thomas. *Signifying Bodies: Disability in Contemporary Life Writing*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009.

El Refaie, Elisabeth. "Of Men, Mice, and Monsters: Body Images in David Small's *Stitches: A Memoir*." *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 3.1 (2012): 55–67. Web. 4 Oct. 2013.

——— *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012.

Faircloth, Christopher A. "Disability, Impairment and the Body." In *Routledge Handbook of Body Studies*. Ed. Bryan S. Turner. London: Routledge, 2012. 256–63.

Frank, Arthur W. *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*. 1995. University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Freedman, Ariela. "'Sorting through My Grief and Putting It into Boxes': Comics and Pain." In *Knowledge and Pain*. Ed. Esther Cohen, Leona Toker, Manuela Consonni, and Otniel E. Dror. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012. 381–99.

Furst, Lilian R. *Between Doctors and Patients: The Changing Balance of Power*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998.

Gardner, Jared. "Autography's Biography, 1972–2007." *Biography* 31.1 (2008): 1–26. Web. 10 Apr. 2013.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Staring: How We Look*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

Gilmore, Leigh, and Elizabeth Marshall. "Trauma and Young Adult Literature: Representing Adolescence and Knowledge in David Small's *Stitches: A Memoir*." *Prose Studies* 35.1 (2013): 16–38. Web. 4 Apr. 2014.

Green, Michael, and Kimberly R. Myers. "Graphic Medicine: Use of Comics in Medical Education and Patient Care." *BMJ* 3 Mar. 2010. 574–7. Web. 6 June 2013.

Hague, Ian. *Comics and the Senses: A Multisensory Approach to Comics and Graphic Novels*. London: Routledge, 2014.

Hatfield, Charles. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005.

Knapp, Mark, and Judith Hall. *Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction*. 7th ed. Boston: Wadsworth, 2010.

Larkin, Ilana. "Absent Eyes, Bodily Trauma, and the Perils of Seeing in David Small's *Stitches*." *American Imago* 71.2 (2014): 183–211. Web. 12 Dec. 2014.

Lupton, Deborah. "Foucault and the Medicalisation Critique." In *Foucault, Health, and Medicine*. Ed. Alan Petersen and Robin Bunton. London: Routledge, 1997. 94–110.

——— *Medicine as Culture: Illness, Disease and the Body*. 3rd ed. Los Angeles: Sage, 2012.

Marks, Christine. "Metaphors We Heal By: Communicating Pain through Illness Narratives." In *Communicating Disease: Cultural Representations of American Medicine*. Ed. Carmen Birkle and Johanna Heil. Heidelberg: Winter, 2013. 291–307.

McGavin, Laura. "'Why should our bodies end at the skin?' Cancer Pathography, Comics, and Embodiment." In *Embodied Politics in Visual Autobiography*. Ed. Sarah Brophy and Janice Hladki. University of Toronto Press, 2014. 189–206.

Mikkonen, Kai. "Graphic Narratives as a Challenge to Transmedial Narratology: The Question of Focalization." In *American Comic Books and Graphic Novels*. Ed. Daniel Stein, Christina Meyer, and Micha Edlich. Spec. issue of *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 56.4 (2011): 637–52.

——— "Subjectivity and Style in Graphic Narratives." In *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative*. Ed. Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thon. Berlin: DeGruyter, 2013. 101–23.

Millett, Ann. "Staring Back and Forth: The Photographs of Kevin Connolly." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 28.3 (2008): n.p. Web. 23 Sept. 2013.

Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000.

Orbán, Katalin. "A Language of Scratches and Stitches: The Graphic Novel between Hyperreading and Print." In *Comics and Media*. Ed. Hillary Chute and Patrick Jagoda. Spec. issue of *Critical Inquiry* 40.3 (2014): 169–81. Web. 12 July 2014.

Packard, Stephan. *Anatomie des Comics: Psychosemiotische Medienanalyse*. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006.

Pedler, Martyn. "Inside Out: Graphic Sickness and David Small's *Stitches*." *Bookslut*. Bookslut, Nov. 2009. Web. 19 Nov. 2013.

Price Herndl, Diane. "Disease versus Disability: The Medical Humanities and Disability Studies." *PMLA* 120.2 (2005): 593–8. Web. 2 June 2014.

St. Pierre, Scott. Rev. of *Stitches: A Memoir*, by David Small. *Disability Studies Quarterly* 31.3 (2011): n.p. Web. 18 Nov. 2013.

Small, David. *Stitches: A Memoir*. New York: Norton, 2009.

——— "From Tales of Wonder to Tales of Horror: David Small Dissects *Stitches*." Interview by Alysia Abbott. *Nieman Storyboard*. Harvard College, 14 May 2010. Web. 19 Nov. 2013.

Squier, Susan M. "So Long as They Grow Out of It: Comics, the Discourse of Developmental Normalcy, and Disability." *Journal of Medical Humanities* 29 (2008): 71–88. Web. 23 Sept. 2013.

Vågnes, Øyvind. "Showing Silence: David Small's *Stitches*." *Studies in Comics* 1.2 (2010): 301–14. Web. 18 Nov. 2013.

Williams, Ian. "Graphic Medicine: Comics as Medical Narrative." *Medical Humanities* 38.1 (2012): 21–7. Web. 12 July 2013.

——— "Graphic Medicine: The Portrayal of Illness in Underground and Autobiographical Comics: Case Study." In *Medicine, Health and the Arts: Approaches to the Medical Humanities*. Ed. Victoria Bates, Alan Bleakley, and Sam Goodman. London: Routledge, 2014. 64–84.

3

The Hidden Architecture of Disability: Chris Ware's *Building Stories*

Todd A. Comer

The most disconcerting fact about Chris Ware's *Building Stories* is that it is very much unlike anything most of us have ever seen. While it was published over several years in publications like *The New York Times Magazine*, it may now be purchased as a "whole" in an almost Monopoly-sized box containing 14 objects: a game board, hardcover books, and numerous comics in broadsheet, newspaper, and flip book form. While items in the collection "may," after a few readings, be placed in an approximately linear order, there is no way of ensuring linearity in a first reading, or perhaps at all. The effect is dizzying, the absent center compelling the reader to immense feats of construction as he or she is faced with not just the empty space of the gutter within *one* singular comic, but the "gutters" that exist in the dynamic, interstitial space between the 14 objects mentioned above. In short, Ware's comic(s) radically exemplifies the reader-response issues described by Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics* (61).

Building Stories includes the requisite gutters, of course, but its form—the fact that the box contains 14 parts—means that this process of readerly construction gets foregrounded to an excessive degree. Finding closure becomes a *bodily* process, an overtly conscious reading process. Italo Calvino's *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler* memorably describes the ritualistic process of diving into a new book: The reader looks over the cover, noting the art and so forth, skims the blurbs on the back cover, and slowly opens the book. But not too fast! Because "like all preliminary pleasures, it has its optimal duration if you want it to serve as a thrust toward the more substantial pleasure of the consummation of the act, namely the reading of the book" (9). We all have such rituals, but they are rituals that we seldom see as rituals since they have been naturalized out of consciousness. *Building Stories*, however, returns a comics reader to this process as if for the first time and by so doing also reminds us of the body and the body's environment, which is too often lost, as we furiously (if unconsciously) ingest page after page of a thrilling novel.

Despite and, in part, because of all of the above, *Building Stories* tells an engrossing story. At the minute level of one singular comic is a relatively coherent, character-driven biography of a woman. It is a matter-of-fact, minutely detailed story, detailing loneliness, absence, ennui, failure, and fleeting moments of happiness. Most interesting, at least for a scholar of disability, is Ware's objective and, at times, scientific portrayal of the unnamed protagonist's body. This matter-of-fact portrayal of a difference that does not *seem* to make a difference is rightly applauded by Margaret Fink Berman, who writes:

> From the perspective of disability studies, the strange discrepancy between the striking presence of the protagonist's short leg in the visual register of "Building Stories" and the near absence of any acknowledgement of her disability in the textual register creates a perplexing interpretative situation. Must bodily variation always signify, one wonders? Might this disability be "merely" there, and thus not really a fruitful object for interpretation? ("Imagining" 191)

Fink Berman argues that the "extraordinary body" in Ware is depicted as "ordinary," allowing for what she calls an "idiosyncratic belonging" (192). The latter denotes a notion of identity as not fixed—a kind of essentialized disability identity—but that of a person who has a physical impairment which requires her to matter-of-factly navigate in particular ways the "spatial and intersubjective transactions" that she confronts from moment to moment (195).

Fink Berman's own experience reading *Building Stories* as it was incrementally released in *The New York Times Magazine* was very different from my own. My critique of her argument is hardly direct therefore as we dealt with an object whose very *form* was dramatically dissimilar. In fact, in a later piece for *The Comics Journal*, she writes,

> If the *New York Times* run I analyzed [...] managed to represent disability as something quotidian by mostly eliding it in the verbal

> register, this novel form of *Building Stories* [here she references the version which shipped in a box] has managed to represent disability as having a real weight in the unfolding of a life without making it exert the kind of overwhelming gravitational pull that ableist interpretations of disability have to assume [...] It was—and remains—my claim that what Ware is accomplishing here is a making-ordinary of a putatively extraordinary body. ("Toc Toc")

However, even with this revised reading of *Building Stories* in the format that concerns me, her positive reading of Ware's representation of disability goes too far.[1] Disability in the box form of the *Building Stories* receives considerable attention at the textual level *and* operates very much as an organizing center for the collection as a whole. Yes, disability possesses an "overwhelming gravitational pull." And, yes, disability is, in fact, a difference that makes a difference in *Building Stories*. In what follows I attend closely to the form of *Building Stories*, to its status as a hermeneutic obstacle, and to disabled bodies, naturally. What I hope to do, however, is show not only how disabled bodies are used as oppressive metaphors but also how the form of comics and our reading of such comics is inherently marked by disability and ableism as well.

* * *

The collection includes 14 comics. One comic is a game board, two are hardbound, and the rest are stapled or unstapled comics. It is, as I write above, a dizzying package both to unpack and read due to its nonlinear form. Where should one begin reading? Apart from the game board, the most distinctive item in the box is one of the hardbound books that deserves our particular attention due as much to its unique style as to its status as a hardbound book (one of only two). Its gold spine and endpapers are very much in the style of the Little Golden Books (A). Additionally, while much of *Building Stories* seems minutely realistic, with Ware's astonishingly detailed, precise panels, in this book we encounter something quite different: An apartment building, ostentatiously anthropomorphized, thinks about its experience of wholeness or vacancy, and, by extension, its mortality. The building even appears to signal the centrality of this particular book when she—yes, the building is gendered and also happens to prefer women—refers to the "high noon of our story just seconds away" (11 a.m.). Based on its unique style, its anthropomorphization, and certain pivotal plot events (our protagonist finds her life partner within its pages), Ware signals the central significance of this book; perhaps, then, with this meaningful center the randomness of *Building Stories* is not so random after all.

I'd like to suggest then that Ware's Little Golden Book parody provides a thematic center for *Building Stories,* a fixity whose "gravitational pull" could be, without nuancing, deeply problematic in terms of disability studies. Opening the book to its first three pages, each a full-page panel, we encounter the crucial element that marks this comic out from almost all of the rest (A). The apartment building that our unnamed protagonist dwells within for part of her life muses upon "vacancy"—how she needs humans, or feels a lack, and, lacking humans, will be demolished. She highlights, visually and textually, her own physical losses over the years as she addresses, somewhat amorously, a woman who is looking in her direction: "You shoulda **seen** me in my heyday, honey ... My new copper cornice gleaming bright, jaunty awnings lazily half-lidded, sheltering my sculptured stone stairway ... Why, I woulda grabbed you and **made** you live in me!" A few pages later, among many "tallie[s]," the building notes that she has overseen "3,312 dreams of dismemberment." Despite her own dismemberments (the copper cornice, for example), the building is "grateful" as new occupants mean at least "24 hours yet to come." The building is only whole and healthy and able to keep death and demolition at a distance due to humans who operate for her like removable prostheses, to draw the inevitable parallel to Ware's protagonist (who shares with the building physical decay, anxiety, and a desire for physical completion in this particular comic).

No one in the building, within Ware's parodic Little Golden Book, is untouched by mortality. The landlady needs a walker; and the couple, both the man and woman, are significantly overweight (her weight receiving much "disgust[ed]" attention from the man [A], while his own beer belly receives no attention in his internal and external commentaries). Reading further into the book, we discover, in fact, that despite the apartment building being filled to capacity (exactly what the anthropomorphized building desires, at least in this hardcover [A]), something is wrong. The landlady is lonely; our protagonist is lonely; even the couple, who have no excuse for it, are lonely.

While admittedly little in *Building Stories* overtly frames the disabled protagonist as worthy of interpretation from a disability studies perspective, there is, from this *unexpected* quarter, just such a framing as the building's thematization of loss and evacuation is paralleled in the body of the protagonist (Mitchell and Snyder 285). If this is so, then disability becomes a paradoxically central and centering metaphor for loss, which is inevitably decentering.

Little Golden Books have a deeply nostalgic quality to them: not only do they remind some of us of children, the warmth of familial domesticity, but they also recall a simpler time in which trauma, "life injur[ies]" (as Ware's protagonist refers to the cause of her amputation), or simply history had not interposed itself between us and others (A). Here's a story taken from the catalog of Little Golden Books that nicely thematizes isolation, wholeness, and disability, while providing at the same time a glimpse of the typical Little Golden Book's use of words and images. In Rachel Learnard's *Funny Bunny* a "bunny" is told that it is lacking a tail and, since, "[a]ll the other animals had tails [they] thought he looked pretty funny without one" (n.p.). Of course, they immediately began laughing, pointing fingers, and calling him "Funny Bunny." Squirrel even tells him that, lacking a tail, he is (rather like the nonlinear narrative of *Building Stories*) not "finished." The bunny, denied access to the social, immediately takes action as an individual, and develops a plan. He begins running through the forest. He passes by several animals, some, like Mr. Beaver, who have tails with utilitarian value. Generally, however, what we see as he runs through the forest are images of washing, the cleaning of tails and bodies. The bunny's missing tail is framed, above all, as an aesthetic lack, even though washing a tail is vastly different from the bodily reconstruction of a rabbit. Eventually, the bunny locates some pitch and cotton and sits on them. Once the cotton adheres, he is "finished," whole, and finds acceptance. The book ends with all of the animals in the forest admiring his tail, which was "finished in beautiful style" (n.p.). In short, *Funny Bunny* opens with bodily "deviance" (Mitchell and Snyder 229), an absent tail upon which the *tale* is grounded, and ends with contentment and wholeness in a forest replete with anthropomorphized animals.

Julie Sinn Cassidy directly addresses the issue of how, in a postmodern world seemingly absent of "rootedness," culture finds ways of healing the "gaps" and returning us to wholeness—wholeness here, while (inevitably) gesturing toward the body, also gestures toward a kind of groundedness in a particular place (145–7). Specifically, Cassidy discusses Little Golden Books that have recirculated in recent times in various forms ("t-shirt decals, stickers, collectables," et cetera), to heal that break in wholeness. "Nostalgia," interestingly, was coined in 1688 to denote a medical condition, the "acute yearning for home." Ware's recirculation of some of the conventional elements of the Little Golden Books prompts the following question: Is Ware engaged in the cultural work of healing in our postmodern age?

Ware, unsurprisingly, is not uncritically recollecting the world of the Little Golden Books. The cover of the book, unlike the other hardcover, is illustrated. On the cover, we see a floor, a solitary woman, an entreating cat, and a journal. What we don't see is the bottom of her left leg, the amputated portion, hidden behind the coffee table upon which the right leg is comfortably resting; the cover does then, due to this visual trick, suggest at first bodily wholeness allied with the nostalgic remembering implicit in the cultural work of the Little Golden Books. The endpapers, in customary Golden Books style, include an illustration of a blank book upon which the book owner is to claim ownership. In Ware's case, the book is doubly blank: There is no copy reading "The Little Golden Book Belongs to," nor any corresponding signature. On the back, the central image is of the demolition of the apartment building, the major setting in the comic (an image of loss and absence, directly contradicting the cover, and linked to the loss of a domestic center). In the four corners of the back cover we see the four previous occupants of the building. Three of them are drawn with their backs facing the reader; none of them are facing one another.

Unlike *Funny Bunny* detailed above, this is a narrative, if one were to judge it on its own and by its covers, that begins in wholeness and ends with death. The cover, again, by hiding the prosthesis, strongly foregrounds wholeness; the back cover illustrates a kind of ontological dispersion by contrast, as the building is demolished and as each of the people do not face one another. The one-time inhabitants of the building seem to be absent from one another based on the cover because of the loss of a domestic center to ground their communion. If this is a postmodern Little Golden Book, it certainly violates both the conventional plot and the generalized desire for closure and wholeness that would be symptomatic of the series. If nostalgia is a retroactive memory of a *wholeness* and purity in a past that did not exist, what we have here then is a nostalgia that is being critically parodied.

Fredric Jameson distinguishes parody from pastiche. Parody "capitalizes on the uniqueness of [...] styles" to "produce an imitation which mocks the original" (113–14); pastiche is "blank parody," by contrast, embodying no real critique. Surely, with the ostentatious theme of loss and the almost unrelenting depression of *Building Stories*, Ware's work falls under the heading of parody, not pastiche. Still, as Jameson argues, parody requires some sense of a norm against which its critical bite might take hold. How are we to understand a comic (that is, this constellation of related objects) whose primary object seems to be the interrogation of norms—in particular, the fully present or whole individual as a source of unwavering, normalized meaning—as also grounded enough to issue a critique in the first place?

Does not the form and subject of *Building Stories* amount to shifting, sinking sand, upon which any critique must founder? In the second hardcover (B), there is a wonderful moment that dramatizes some of these issues. Our protagonist wants to be an artist and is partaking in a class critique. The teacher is discussing how beauty and symmetry tend to be linked in relation to a particular abstract, if symmetrical, erotic painting, only to then call on her, asking, "What about our resident assymetrist [sic]? You are being awfully quiet ..." The protagonist pauses, awkwardly, and then states, "I think it is beautiful." A few panels later, as the class considers another symmetrical, if much less abstract, painting with the text "FUCK ME HARDER" dripping down the canvas, she blows up in spectacular fashion: "I said it's **stupid**!" Of course, this is a wonderfully suggestive series of panels, framed by sexuality and desire, as it is not merely her paintings that are asymmetrical, but also her body. The male teacher is calling attention both to the protagonist's art *and* her body, and thereby opening up the class to an aesthetic consideration of her body. The protagonist's body embodies (and seemingly determines) her art. Asymmetry in art is materialized in the asymmetrical body (which, on another level, is exactly what the asymmetrical form of *Building Stories* seems to also accomplish in a deeply problematic manner). Ware is *not* his protagonist, of course, but here we see a dramatic example of a critique that lacks a foundation (as materialized in an amputated leg), and seems to generate nothing substantial.

Perhaps a loss of effectivity is the price that such work must pay to critique wholeness: to critique wholeness from, let's say, the conventional world of superhero comics—and arguably the work of Ware is to some degree an indirect critique of the ableism of the monadic superhero—would make little sense, as it would be inherently contradictory. The essence of the superhero—Superman, for instance, as Alan Moore represents him in *The Jungle Line*—is to be blindly unaware of finitude, or his relation to the world around him (when Superman transcendently flies away at the end of the comic [151], his transcendence is built upon the repression of his dependence on the Swamp Thing, that loaded metaphor of rhizomatic posthumanism).[2] In other words, to be logically consistent, a critique of wholeness in terms of nostalgic remembering or the ableist body must come from a space that is not whole, understanding that ontology and epistemology are both here and there, both present and absent, forever escaping any closure.

Building Stories does have a center and it is a center that frames the comics and humanity in terms of disability as a kind of decentering dissolution. However, simultaneously, even as Ware's comics attempt to rope in their own meaning using disability as a metaphor, his comics also parody such attempts to make sense of reality as deeply nostalgic, and, yes, childish.

* * *

Ware's protagonist is searching for a book (D). She considers Melville, Joyce, Proust, Nabokov, and Dostoevsky. But she hesitates. "**Fuck!**" she says, "Why does every 'great book' have to always be about criminals or perverts? Can't I just find one that's about **regular** people living everyday **life**?" She is searching, obviously, for her book—a book about utterly normal people. A corollary of sorts to the Author, the heroes of many of the above writers tend to fall ontologically into the same sort of monadic relationship with the world. It is the traditional hero's journey, his or her individual ableist conflict, which arouses the interest of the reader. While much has been or could be written on the topic of ableism and the traditional hero, what appears evident is the following: The story of the non-hero, at least in the case of Ware, required new narratival devices with which to hold the attention of the reader. This is only partially true, of course, because to the degree that the protagonist becomes a metaphor for a larger cosmic state, she becomes quite akin to many traditional heroes who metaphorize particular human states. Even so, consider the following narrative strategies and how they could be seen as a prosthetic response to the vacuum created by the absence of a traditional hero.

I opened with some general comments about reader-response theory in an attempt to explain the radical demands of *Building Stories*. McCloud explains in *Understanding Comics* how much of our understanding of reality is based on faith. While our "senses," inherently limited as they are, may only experience an "incomplete" and "fragmented" reality, we tend to, as an "act of faith," create the world as a whole (62). We approach comics in a similar way, imaginatively filling in the inherently fragmentary nature of the medium, finding hermeneutic closure, though we have no absolute idea what happens between panels. Part of the wonder and part of the complexity of this series of related objects is that such hermeneutic "gaps" are not just there formally between panels and, more radically, between the moveable comics of *Building Stories*, but they are repeated and complicated on several levels in the text.

While, yes, it is true that disability—in this case, that "gap" which is also an amputation—is naturalized to a large extent, if you will, in much of *Building Stories*, is it not true that for the reader, raised on cultural representations overflowing with metaphors of disability, it is impossible to not read *for* disability? We bring, as McCloud writes, all of our past experiences into play as we read and interpret people and texts (63), and it would be impossible, arguably, to read without some sort of unconscious or conscious understanding or expectation of disability in a narrative. Disability, as with anything which is exotic or abnormal, demands a narrative (Mitchell and Snyder 227). Humans confronted with a gap, an amputation, desire a narratival explanation and Ware's work, intentionally or not, capitalizes off of such a desire, even if it may parody our desires. On one level, the surprising formal nature of *Building Stories* (which denies closure) will compel readers, drawing them in as they seek a final stable meaning. The same is true for the use of disability, which acts as a concrete embodiment of the formal dissolution of the comics. The fact that we get so little explanation (on one level), as we are trained to expect, of the cause of the protagonist's physical impairment can only, as one slowly works through the complicated elements of the collection, lead to an even greater tension and desire to know.

We do *act* as if works are *whole* and we certainly, in a related fashion, discuss works as if they were individual "bodies." Roland Barthes's analysis of how the figure of the "Author" has been constructed by "capitalist ideology" helps explain why we tend to individualize our readings (254). The Author has produced within the reader a tendency to privilege the "'person' of the author." We look to the author to interpret a work for us. We might then speak of Ware's *oeuvre* or his *corpus*, his body of work, for example. Of course, while *Building Stories* surely does privilege the birth of the reader insofar as it demands that the reader order the different components found within the box, in general this capitalist ideology remains with us, so that we tend to look for coherence, wholeness, a clarity of meaning that remains well bordered as materialized in the individual body. As Barthes argues, history and capitalism deny any systemic, border and body crossing origin for meaning that would as a result foreground the relative passivity of the individual Human. The well-bordered individual body (as metaphor perhaps), if not an *authorial* body, remains a hidden assumption behind all of our analyses.

It is a strange scene. As the reader looks at the comics for the missing piece to the puzzle of disability, he or she is also simultaneously examining the *corpus* Ware, picking up one member, flipping it around, prodding another, and throwing another away in disgust. The reader wants to know how and why this disability occurred and yet, thrown (and attracted) by the form of *Building Stories*, is forced both to return to his or her own body, and to return to the materiality of the 14 members that constitute *Building Stories*.

What this suggests is that the radical, exploded nature of *Building Stories* begs to be understood as a fascinating hermeneutic stunt, as a metaphor for disability (and vice versa), and as a commentary on the body's dissolution (all of those individual comics becoming, if you will, dismembered feet, hands, legs, head, and torso). If so, Ware's *Building Stories*, rather than treating disability as just one more difference that does not make a difference, uses disability as a central metaphor to work through issues of power and interpretation, and even relation, as I describe below.

Wholeness implies borders as much as it does bodily health. The protagonist's lower leg is amputated and as such she undergoes a blow both to her health and to her skin's integrity. Ware repeats this sort of spatial violation innumerable times. The young woman's toilet overflows; the water leaks through into the roof of the couple's apartment; the man (half of the couple) at work as a security guard in a different building discovers a raccoon infestation in the ducts; a cat is lost, temporarily; and the apartment building itself, finally, is pierced by a wrecking ball (A).

In other texts, a cut or an amputation might signal human connection across ableist borders. Here, spatial violation, the experience of the world on the outside polluting the inside (or, contrariwise, the loss of a center to the self, as the self is lost to the outside), does not lead to human communion, but, instead, appears to be associated with loneliness and frustration. Perhaps, for the anthropomorphized building, wholeness may be had, but for humans, wholeness and intimacy are lacking even when they should be within reach. From a disability studies perspective, the connection between the loss of borders and the disabled body becomes yet one more negative stereotype: the disabled body embodies loneliness and operates here as a metaphor for the loss and dissolution of all human endeavors.

Ware's protagonist is best described as a "material metaphor" for the above abstractions. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder write, "[t]his form of textual embodiment concretizes an otherwise ephemeral concept within a corporeal essence. To give an abstraction a body allows the idea to simulate a foothold in the material [world] that it would otherwise fail to procure" (285). She is, in the absence of her lower leg, an embodiment of loneliness, incompletion, and the absencing space between humans. Clearly, using disability in such a way is ethically suspect, because it follows a long history of representations that objectify by marginalizing individuality, raising a singular marker, a disability, to the level of an abstraction. Rather than seeing a physical impairment as merely ordinary, a difference that does not make a difference, what we have here centers disability as the general metaphor by which all other particularities may be understood. Even worse, insofar as the form of *Building Stories* is understood to be a natural effect of a disabled body, the generalized implication is that all disabled bodies will, as a result, experience fragmentation, confusion, loss. Certainty, power, and so on naturally reside in able bodies.

The following is a good example of how moments of (meaning and) communion evaporate within the narrative even as the protagonist as reader-author reaches for closure. This, the text seems to suggest, is the experience of humanity, though materialized in individual disability.

Our protagonist has had a dream (C). She is browsing a bookstore and finds, literally, her book. Someone published a book about her and it is, like *Building Stories*, in fragments ("my diaries, the stories from my writing classes, even stuff I didn't know I'd written ... everything I'd forgotten, abandoned or thrown out was there ... everything"). It was, she says to her adult daughter, as if an "architect" had drawn the illustrations. It was "beautiful" and "it made sense." But then her daughter "laugh[s]," explaining, well, how "***retarded***" and "***obvious***" the dream is—after all, the mother is married to an architect. The daughter implies, if I may delve into that which is unsaid for a moment, that the dream is less about the mother (as reader-writer) than about the father (author-architect) she married (or, for that matter, Chris Ware, the Author) who gave her focus and coherence; in this way, the dream's message becomes gendered and disempowering.

For the dreamer, this is a special moment. She has suffered from self-doubt for much of her early life. Her self-doubt and loathing prompt depression and withdrawal from the world (B); "I just want to fall asleep and never wake up again," she thinks at one point. The front endpapers visually map her thought process, a hermeneutic "spiral" in which she considers her parents "ag[ing]," her body "deterior[ating]," her friends "disappear[ing]," and many other matters. It is a messy spiral, a spiral that might resemble the process by which Ware's readers work through his *corpus*. Eight pages further in, she thinks to herself, "whole periods of my life are nothing more than a few isolated, unrelated recollections." Her life lacks coherence, direction, purpose. By the end of this particular comic, she has had an abortion. She is "all sucked out" and deserted by her lover.

Her dream then is a response to this profound sense of ontological evacuation, and it suggests that her life has been not only meaningful (despite the fragments which do not cohere readily), but beautiful, and that she, *as a reader*, created it: "But the point is, ***I*** dreamed it ... ***I*** saw it—***made*** it—with my own two eyes ..." She is then both the subject of the narrative and the reader-constructor of the text as well. The dream, in this case, becomes an artwork, a form of closure. It becomes that synthesizing brainstorm that pulls her life together into a meaningful pattern, something she was never able to do consciously. Of course, this is a metafictional moment that signals a rare thesis about the book, and a Barthesian affirmation of Ware's readers' creative potential. But note how this moment of construction, the moment of coherence and meaning, the moment of *wholeness* in short, is immediately undermined in a crass, ableist manner: ***Retarded***.

The protagonist states that "I just never thought I had it ***in*** me, that's all, you know." Her dreaming is a moment of coherence, sense-making, and spatial construction. Meaning involves a kind of hermeneutic roping *in* (and exclusion), a denial of all that would defer meaning to the outside and undermine full presence (Derrida 8–9). Ironically, this sense-making, which is connected with completion and coherence or the *corpus*, is not "retarded" at all. It is tied to ableism. But her daughter, confident and sure of herself as any young person from an affluent, educated family who is poised to begin her own artistic career, responds with a kind of rote ableist ego. Neither the mother nor the daughter appear to recognize a third option: the possibility that the origin of meaning does not arise out of an autarchic self, but comes perhaps from *both* author and reader, and others, an infinite deferral.

Jean-Luc Nancy's work on community suggests that the "death of others,"—or, at any rate, finitude—leads to a kind of non-exclusionary community (15). Traditional community he rightly sees connected with exclusionary identities (3) and as concomitant with the work of mythmaking (43). Community is constructed in tandem with works that we might call ableist, insofar as a work's coherence and meaning are allied to a body, the healthy body of a community, which, centered and whole with the help of a *Declaration*, or holy book, is then able to progress and *work* out its own history in exclusionary and assimilationist ways. When a work, communal or literary, is unworked—the French title of Nancy's book is *La communauté désoeuvrée*—something else happens. Without the borders of a work, the communal self finds itself outside of itself; it finds its self in the other (that which had been excluded to bolster the present self is discovered to have always been part of the "self"). This is another sort of community, perhaps a "disabled" community, and it is what we see here in this exchange between mother and daughter—this is true insofar as the mother's attempt to create a coherent work falters and opens up her own being to the outside. Within such a community, truth does not exist within any one person, but is infinitely shared, a universal condition for all humans.

What should have been a tender moment, a moment of community (in the traditional sense), of recuperation, is immediately evacuated. Rather than a kind of coming together of presence and meaning, their relationship is not stabilized, finding itself outside of itself, much like the constellation of objects known collectively as *Building Stories,* and, to the degree that disability has become a universal metaphor in these comics, much like the experience of disability.

* * *

While Ware may be representing a universal norm (that is to say, a tedious, anxiety-ridden picture of day-to-day dissolution), his reliance on disability, his need to highlight an extraordinary body, to tell the tale of the mundane is suspect. Ware's work, so desperately in need of an organizing center, uses disability as a tool to both spur on desire and ultimately as a handy metaphor for depicting the existential crisis that defines humanity. Even while naturalizing disability as a metaphor, *Building Stories* is a deeply denaturalizing comic. It provokes, troubles, and prompts interpretation. Its form may well save it at the end of the hermeneutic spiral, if there is an end, from any simple attack from the standpoint of disability studies. Even so, *Building Stories* is also a lesson in how even that which appears to be avant-garde in form and content will remain tainted by conventional representational politics.

Notes

1. Comics frustrate the process of attribution, and Ware's *Building Stories* doubly so. Pagination, for example, is unclear in most cases, and it is certainly difficult to distinguish one comic from the next. Below, I will follow this process: A=Hardcover Little Golden Book parody; B=Hardcover 12 x 9½; C=Stapled Paperback 12 x 9; D=Newspaper 16 x 22 (four pages).
2. If interested in the subject of an ontology that does not reproduce the monadic violence of the superhero, I recommend Brian Johnson's work on

Swamp Thing in "Libidinal Ecologies: Eroticism and Environmentalism" in my co-edited collection, *Sexual Ideology in the Works of Alan Moore*.

Works cited

Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." In *Falling into Theory: Conflicting Views on Reading Literature*. Ed. David Richter. New York: Bedford, 2000. 253–7.

Calvino, Italo. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. Trans. William Weaver. London: Harcourt Brace, 1979.

Cassidy, Julie Sinn. "Transporting Nostalgia: The Little Golden Book as Souvenirs of Childhood." *Children's Literature* 36 (2008): 145–61.

Derrida, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy*. University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Fink Berman, Margaret. "Imagining an Idiosyncratic Belonging: Representing Disability in Chris Ware's 'Building Stories.'" In *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking*. Ed. David M. Vall and Martha B. Kuhlman. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010. 191–205.

——— "The Toc Toc of 'Nothing, Really.'" *The Comics Journal*. 18 Oct. 2012. Web.

Jameson, Fredric. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." In *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Ed. Hal Foster. Seattle: Bay Press, 1983. 111–25.

Johnson, Brian. "Libidinal Ecologies: Eroticism and Environmentalism." In *Sexual Ideology in the Works of Alan Moore: Critical Essays on the Graphic Novels*. Ed. Todd Comer and Joseph Michael Sommers. London: McFarland, 2012.

Learnard, Rachel. *Funny Bunny*. 1950. New York: Western Publishing Company, 1978.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1993.

Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. "Narrative Prosthesis." In *The Disability Studies Reader*. Ed. Lennard Davis. New York: Routledge, 2010. 274–86.

Moore, Alan. *DC Universe: The Stories of Alan Moore*. New York: DC, 2006.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Inoperative Community*. Ed. Peter Connor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

Ware, Chris. *Building Stories*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2012.

4

Standing Orders: Oracle, Disability, and Retconning

José Alaniz

For Rosemarie Garland-Thomson[1]

Barbara Gordon, the most fully realized disabled superhero in the genre, was born able-bodied. She debuted in 1967: she led a secret double life as Batgirl and as the able-bodied librarian daughter of Batman's ally, Gotham City Police Commissioner James Gordon (Misiroglu 55).[2] As part of the "Batman family," Gordon/Batgirl reflected the evolution in female representation in the genre through the late 1960s and into the 1970s, when she served as a congresswoman and even ran for President (Misiroglu 55).

However, by the time of Frank Miller's darker, more violent vision of Batman in *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), the DC editorship had deemed Batgirl's sunny optimism out of place; they semi-retired the character. In a post-*DKR,* post-*Watchmen* world, Gordon's life took a sadistic and bloody turn. The celebrated Alan Moore/Brian Bolland graphic novel *The Killing Joke* (1988) saw Batman arch-villain the Joker attack Commissioner Gordon at home, shoot his daughter point-blank through the spine, and paralyze her. Not just the act itself, but the exploitative, ultra-violent storytelling employed in the scene made it ground zero in turn-of-the-century fandom gender wars;[3] for many female readers it exposed the misogynist underpinnings of the industry, in 1999 even inspiring writer Gail Simone to co-found the Women in Refrigerators website devoted to superheroines and male superheroes' girlfriends killed, maimed, depowered, and otherwise abused.

From such ignominious treatment, Gordon would undergo a remarkable transformation. Under writers Kim Yale and John Ostrander, the character reemerged as a wheelchair-using paraplegic with an encyclopedic knowledge of computer/internet technology, a master of eskrima (a form of legless martial arts), and a superior tactician. Over the course of the 1990s and 2000s, primarily under writers Chuck Dixon and Simone, Gordon gained new life (and depth) as Oracle, cyberhacker and "infojock" to the DC Universe, fighting lawbreakers on a global scale. With the Birds of Prey, a female-only group she founded as her field operatives, Oracle became the linchpin of a new era's information-driven efforts to stamp out crime from her secret high-tech perch atop a Gotham City clock tower. More than this: particularly under Simone, Gordon presented a positive and empowering image of a person with a disability who lived life to the fullest, in both her private and superheroic roles. Nothing quite like this had ever been seen in the genre before.

It lasted some two decades.

Then, as periodically happens in a commercial, serial-driven industry, Gordon's life changed "again." In 2011, the "New 52," a controversial company-wide retconning of the DCU, reset the clock for world-famous characters/brands such as Superman and Wonder Woman to an earlier period in their careers. The editorial decision came down: Barbara Gordon, after 23 years as a paraplegic, would "return" as the able-bodied Batgirl. Fan reaction split between those exhilarated at the prospect of "Babs" back in costume, sailing over rooftops, and those who saw the move as a craven betrayal of their greatest icon and role model in the genre, a figure who in a real sense represented them. The "de-disabling" of Gordon erupted into one of the most divisive aspects of the "New 52."

This chapter examines a number of episodes from the Oracle saga for how they portray the lived realities of life in a wheelchair (that is, what made her different), the contentious decision to reboot the character's paraplegia out of existence (that is, what made her the same), and the aftermath for what they tell us of comics' representation of disability; the quasi-eugenicist presumptions of superheroes; and the politics of retconning at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Life in a wheelchair

As noted, Oracle the superhero was born of Gordon's personal trauma, one emblematic of female representation in superhero comics at the time and, too often, since. Her reemergence as one of the genre's "most inspiring role models" (De Angelis)[4] attests to the flexibility and fluidity of identity in continuity-driven serial narrative. That said, Gordon's journey of course unfolded in fits and starts over two decades under different creative teams, congealing into relative consistency only in retrospect—for example, through the convention of the "Year One" story.

"Oracle Year One: Born of Hope" (1996), written by Yale and Ostrander, with art by Brian Stelfreeze and Karl Story, fashions that coherence, portraying the aftermath of Gordon's shooting and recovery to effectively relaunch the character. But it does more than that; its 18 pages present a decidedly post-ADA tale of real-world challenges, courage, and self-acceptance.

From its opening, crowned by a quote on despair by Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, "Born of Hope" resounds with solemnity: we see Gordon in her dark hospital room shortly after the Joker's attack, Batman (all symbol: depicted only as a black silhouette and logo) trying to console her. But she confronts him:

> G: Do you understand how humiliating, how demeaning that is?! My life has no importance save in relation to you! Even as Batgirl, I was perceived as just some weaker version of you!
> B: I caught him, Barbara ...
> G: Oh, yes, I heard about that. I heard you two stood there, laughing over some private joke. Tell me—was it me? (3)

Hardly the motivational "prop" for a manly hero's journey, here Gordon strikes at the very heart of the "Women in Refrigerators" convention, insisting on her own autonomy. Her pointed jab at the ending of *The Killing Joke* (the male "private joke") resounds as a denunciation of the misogynist "boy's club" mentality which the industry promoted in this era. But beyond the feminist critique, "Born of Hope" spends a considerable portion of the narrative illustrating the day-to-day lived realities of a newly disabled person, to a degree never before seen in superhero comics. Gordon's first attempt to climb from her wheelchair into a car—in full view of gawking reporters—takes up nine panels laid out onto a full page, accentuating the slow, carefully "choreographed" process (5) and visualizing Gordon's words in voiceover from the previous page: "You know when you're healthy, when you're whole, there's a million simple things you do every day that you take completely for granted. Things that, for me, were no longer so simple" (4). The reader is encouraged to put the two "pieces"—text and images—together across the page break, a wrenching illustration of Gordon's own "broken" status.

"Broken" not in body, but spirit. Gordon, like many in her circumstances, is focused on what she has lost: "Such as getting in a car. I used to just jump in and out ... like most people" (5). She experiences what Robert Murphy, an anthropologist who became a paraplegic in middle age, described as a deeply disorienting shift of identity for those not born with a disability: "Not only are their bodies altered, but their ways of thinking about themselves and about the persons and objects of the external world have become profoundly transformed. They have experienced a revolution of consciousness. They have undergone a metamorphosis" (87). In her own memoir, Simi Linton puts it more succinctly: "The injury was a sudden cataclysmic event, and the paralysis in my legs was instant. Becoming disabled took much longer" (*My Body Politic* 3).

The work of "becoming disabled"—accepting oneself in one's new identity—also receives ample attention in "Born of Hope." Gordon appears in successive panels, undergoing physical rehab ("my six months in the shadows"), and adjusting to her chair—in other words, to relearn who she is in body and mind: a woman who will never walk again. "Worst of all was the fear I felt—of being physically helpless, unable to defend myself," she narrates. "Of having no sense of self, of feeling that I meant nothing, that my life was now over" (6).

Three things restore Gordon's "sense of self"[5]—and, as it happens, they roughly correspond to Peter Coogan's primary tripartite definition of the superhero: mission, identity, powers.[6] Mission: Gordon embarks on a task to foil a computer hacker, Ashley Mavis Powell, in the course of which she discovers real purpose, as well as "enormous freedom and complete acceptance" in cyberspace (8). Identity: anonymity online means anyone can "become" anything—"I realized the internet could be a mask as surely as any cowl. I could assume an identity ... This would be mine—my mask, my shield—my persona" (15). A meaning-laden dream of Ancient Greece inspires Gordon to take on the digital "mask" of Oracle. Powers: apart from computer skills, Gordon still needs mastery over her new body, to stop feeling "unable to defend myself." She seeks out a martial arts master, Richard Dragon, who both teaches her eskrima and compels her to face the question, "Who are you?" (11).

Yale and Ostrander in effect tailor "Born of Hope" as the answer: Barbara Gordon is no longer Batgirl, she is Oracle: disabled heroine, confident woman, complete human being. From early scenes which depict her as separate from crowds, lurking shamefully in shadows; where she is called a "cripple," nervous about crossing streets in her chair, on sidewalks with no curb cuts (n.p.); where she is burdened by self-blame about her victimhood: "I was such an idiot" (1), by the end of the story Gordon has rejoined the flow of life, pushing her chair through the throngs, smiling joyfully in the bright yellow sunshine as white doves flutter: "A little over a year has passed since my old life ended, since I died and was reborn. The shadows remain, but only to give contrast to the light. I am no longer a distaff impersonation of someone else. I'm me—*more me than I have ever been*. My life is my own. I embrace it, and the light, with a deep, continuing joy" (18; my emphasis). That "more me than I have ever been" gives the lie to the notion of lack built into ableist formulations of disability; the final low-angle shot of the newly realized Gordon in public concretizes the post-ADA vision of the disabled subject as a full member of society, full stop.

In stories unfolding over the next decade and a half, the (mostly) unremarked acceptance of Gordon's disability would grow into a consistent aspect of the character's "business as usual"—it shaped her view of the world and interactions with others, without necessarily determining them, like any other facet of identity. Moreover, simply by depicting in considerable detail the banal realia of life in a wheelchair, these works were breaking ground. "Damages," for example, opens with a point-of-view shot of a person whose wheelchair has been turned over on the street by a fleeing mugger, inserting the reader into a disabled subjectivity (1). In later scenes we follow Gordon as she wheels herself through rainy city streets (passersby block her way, ignoring her; a large puddle has formed at a curb cut) (5), exercises in her private gym (6), and boards a bus with a ramp (8) in her quest to solve the mystery of the criminal who preys on disabled people (a case deemed "low priority" by Gotham police and other superheroes), while dealing with recurring nightmares about her shooting (3, 6).

It should be said that the "anchor" of Gordon's decades-long citizenship in DC continuity lends tales like "Born of Hope" and "Damages" an unusual affective power. The emotional connection contributes to the process by which, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues, disability representation "structures rather than reflects reality"—a particularly important breakthrough in a genre traditionally associated with ableist triumphalism. As she further notes: "The way we imagine disability through images and narratives determines the shape of the material world, the distribution of resources, our relationships with one another, and our sense of ourselves" ("Disability" 523).

In *Birds of Prey,* first and foremost under Simone's writerly helm, we see the most fully fledged form of Garland-Thomson's world-reshaping pro-disability vision. In Simone's first run (2003–7), the series incorporated major and minor disability topoi into the narrative as a matter of course—a landmark in mainstream comics, especially for disabled readers presented at last with a major character to identify with on more than a superficial level. Big and small, these "disablemes" fed into the series' inclusive, feminist ethos: when Dinah Lance (Black Canary) matter-of-factly asks Gordon, "Want help?" to move from a couch to her chair, her friend replies, "You know I don't" and continues the conversation as the two comfortably watch television at home (Simone and Bennet 9); we see Gordon discussing her and ex Dick Grayson/Nightwing's post-paralysis sex life with Lance and Helena Bertinelli/Huntress (Simone and Benes n.p.); we are privy to her morning regimen, from waking up to showering in her modified bathroom (Simone and Siqueira 58); and witness her negotiate the "jerky" hydraulics and breakdown of lifts on a public bus and stairway, as well as an offer of help from a respectful passerby (Simone and Siqueira 59).

Furthermore, Simone built on an aspect of the series introduced under Dixon's tenure: the outright blending of superheroics and disability, through episodes that showed Gordon—as always, unmasked—going through her daily activities while engaged via communications link with her costume-wearing operatives in the field. In one scene, she winds down after a shower while still consulting with Huntress and Selina Kyle/Catwoman as they prowl the city's rooftops (Dixon and Gorfinkel 193). Such page compositions, juxtaposing public and private, lend a mood of both frivolity and twenty-first-century interconnectedness via technology.

Yet another subtle innovation emerged from *Birds of Prey*'s "disability-friendly" modus operandi: Oracle directing missions from the safety of her Clocktower HQ enabled her to have a panoptic scope of the team's actions, carry on simultaneous actions in different locations as well as cyberspace, and project her voice—via earpiece—live across the globe, disrupting conventional notions of time, space, and presence. Indeed, Gordon's remote voice (in later years rendered in glowing green textboxes) not only makes her a potent authoritative force in the series. It also to some degree partakes of Mary Ann Doane's psychoanalytic reading of the off-screen female voice in cinema, linked by some to the pre-Oedipal voice of the mother. But as Doane argues, it also serves as "the instrument of interdiction, of the patriarchal order" (346), thus associated with the superego.

The "Oracle's voice as superego" trope manifested often in the series, overseeing, encouraging but also admonishing her vigilante teammates to adhere to a strict moral/legal code. Their need for long-distance "motherly" support during a crisis often sets up high-stakes drama; when Lance finds herself bloody and all but beaten by a foe, Gordon sermonizes in her ear:

> Do you think I like sending out agents to do my dirty work? Do you think I get my *thrills* living vicariously? Do you think I don't know hurt? You don't know hurt, sister! I can't get off the mat to take down thugs like Lynx on my own—but you can. And by God, you *will*—because if you don't you'll regret it—the rest of your life.

The pep talk works: Black Canary struggles to her feet and fights on to victory (Dixon and Gorfinkel 48–9). But just as often, her team's resistance to Oracle's demands erupts into open conflict, as when the selfsame Lance insists on killing a mass murderer in her clutches—due process be damned—after witnessing his crimes against children. They argue over the comlink:

> BK: You weren't there. You didn't see the bodies. Lying in the mud as far as I could see [...]
> O: You've stopped him. The evidence we've dug up will have him doing life sentences in a half dozen countries.
> [...]
> BK: It's not enough.

Such scenes enact an anguished, ongoing dialogue in *Birds of Prey* on the limits (and paradoxes) of superheroism, with Oracle as the "big picture" general, the others as "in the trenches" grunts.

Finally, in her run Simone sought to respond to the disabled community's sensitivities regarding Oracle. In 2005 this led to a scene referencing Christopher Reeve, who had died the previous year. In "Perfect Pitch (Part I)," Gordon learns from an apologetic Doctor Mid-Nite/Pieter Cross (himself a disabled character with impaired vision) that, while her damaged tissue has partly regenerated thanks to therapy, the improvement is limited to some movement in her toes.[7] Far from disappointment, however, a tearful Gordon experiences an epiphany. Gazing through a window at bright sunshine, white doves and autumn leaves, she soliloquizes:

> Doctor, it's been several years since the accident. I've done the exercises faithfully. I've had the therapies. And in all that time, there's never been a single moment of improvement. Now I can move my toes. I can look down and see my body respond, like they're waving back at me. If nothing else ever comes of all this ... [silent panel as Gordon gazes at sun, tear falling down her cheek] Well, it's still an unspeakably wonderful gift, isn't it? (Simone and Siqueira 52–3)

While sentimentalized, the scene taps productively into the mixed emotions of those who experience impaired function later in life; disabled writers Nancy Mairs and John Hockenberry have embraced such complexity. The scene complicates the simple notion of "cure at all costs" advanced by Reeve by remarking on function as a relative value, and on "gifts" as coming in many different forms.

Let us contrast "Pitch Perfect" with what I consider a less successful, more cure-driven *Birds of Prey* narrative from the pre-Simone era, "The Chaotic Code, Part 2: Crash and Burn." In the course of the adventure, Gordon's leg function is temporarily restored, whereupon she proceeds to beat her captors and jump out a glass window several stories high. In her "better, stronger" condition, an exhilarated Gordon exclaims, "I feel *incredible!* It's like I *woke up* from a bad dream!" (Moore and Conner 4). As she flies over rooftops once more, captions communicate her thoughts: "The wind *rushes* to my face and sucks my breath away. I am *whole.* I am *alive.* I had forgotten" (6). Apart from echoing the 55-year-old Bruce Wayne's hypermasculine, age-defying internal monologue from *The Dark Knight Returns* ("[I]'m a man of *thirty*—of *twenty* again. The rain on my chest is a *baptism*—I'm born again ..." [34]), the verbiage taps all too readily into the genre's celebration of physically ideal "superfeats," relatable to what the disability studies scholar Tobin Siebers calls the "ideology of ability," fantastically negating years of Gordon's embodied alterity; blatantly, it declares that only able-bodied people are "whole" and "alive." Coupled with Amanda Conner's more cartoonish, "silly" art (conveying a rather limited emotional range), the scene is fatally emptied of the subtlety displayed in "Pitch Perfect."

Many of *Birds of Prey*'s disability-related themes—hits as well as misses—appear in the last work I wish to examine in detail, the posthumous[8] 2009 mini-series *Oracle: The Cure* by writer Kevin VanHook and artists Julian López and Fernando Pasarin. This post-Simone solo tale shows Gordon on her own, her team dissolved, tracking down the cyber-villain Calculator from Asia to Gotham to the virtual world. Creators had long shown a confident Oracle in charge, though rarely in the field; here we see her physically dominate Hong Kong street muggers, upend sexist jokes from male hackers (who assumed from her online persona that she was a man), and confront the master criminal in the flesh.

Disablemes abound; 22 years after her paralysis, writer VanHook has clearly accepted these as inherent to the character, a fixed aspect of her identity: we witness an unusually glamorous Gordon showering in her new apartment, thinking she should "mod this bathroom and make it a little more *wheelchair friendly*" (59)*;* her father pick her up in a van equipped with a ramp, quite a contrast from the trouble of boarding an unmodified car in "Born of Hope" (60); commenting on phantom pain in her legs—textboxes twice say, "They hurt sometimes," in tension with panels depicting her intense martial arts practice session (64). Gordon continues to fixate on the trauma of her shooting, as would Bruce Wayne on his parents' murder, even admitting that "in her *darkest* moments" she wishes she had died that day (65). Finally, the plot centers on the Calculator's efforts to use the anti-life equation to heal his comatose daughter; the scheme only partially works: she wakes up, though as a paraplegic.

But *The Cure*'s most penetrating insights deal with Gordon's journey into cyberspace: the freedom of movement she experiences in her able-bodied, cat-suited avatar and as an Iron Man-like figure in the virtual reality game Alta Viva (both highlighted through double-page spreads, at 90–1 and 118–19) reflect research findings on the perceived opportunities of online worlds such as Second Life for people with physical disabilities. The artificial environments "allo[w] for personal control over representation, and can foster a sense of equality for individuals with disabilities, who may often experience discrimination in everyday life" (Kleban and Kaye 63).

All told, *Oracle: The Cure* presents a remarkable twenty-first-century vision of a feminist disabled subjectivity in action, which concedes nothing to the genre's traditionally male-driven order of business. It depicts a resourceful, intelligent woman who happens to get around in a wheelchair (and whose disability, unapologetically, is central to who she is), while acknowledging the many barriers (interpersonal, sexist, ableist, superheroic) she must negotiate to save the world. Quite a distance indeed from Gordon's humble "me too" origins in the *Batman* TV show and Oracle's ignoble birth in misogynist violence. Or as writer Grant Morrison put it, "A character born to camp in one medium was transplanted to richer soil where she grew into a fascinating and complex living fiction" (335).

And then, one day, that Barbara Gordon vanished—as though she'd never been.

Holy retcon, Babs

DC lowered the boom on 31 May 2011 with the announcement that it would cancel all ongoing series and replace them with a "New 52" lineup, each title restarting with issue #1. Editor-in-chief Bob Harras called it a "soft reboot," not a retcon—industry terms characterized by their vagueness.[9] The net effect was the alteration of many characters' histories, costumes, and storylines (returning them to their younger selves at an earlier point in their lives—which nonetheless still read as the "present") and erasing continuity in some cases built up over decades. For Gordon, this meant the total annulment of her time as Oracle and the reconstitution of her character trajectory to make her paralysis only temporary—after 23 years, she would once more take up the mantle of her first alter ego, the able-bodied Batgirl.

Fandom response was swift, impassioned, and polarizing. Some applauded the move, seeing Gordon's "truest" role as Batgirl, the heroic identity with which her history began; they deemed Oracle some sort of decades-long aberration brought about by the genre's misogynistic treatment of women (Cochran; Garrity). A cartoon by Erica Henderson, posted to her website in the late 2000s, perfectly captured these fans' feelings. In a nine-panel composition, eight panels show male DC heroes/villains boasting of their run-ins with death and dismemberment, followed in short order by full recovery: from Lex Luthor ("When I was diagnosed with cancer I made a clone of myself and then had my brain transplanted into the clone body") to Robin/Damian Wayne ("While out fighting crime as a Batman sidekick, I got shot in the spine. But it's cool. I got a new spine") to Ra's al Ghul ("Lazarus Pit!"). The final panel shows Oracle, fuming in her chair.[10]

As Henderson's gag shows, a segment of the fan base had never embraced Oracle; in her wheelchair use they saw not a disability-friendly vision of diversity—they saw a sexist double-standard (whereby only men get easy cures) and the glorification of violence against women. For them, Gordon returning as Batgirl was a restorative move, the righting of a gender wrong. Others saw things very differently; they were witnessing the corporate betrayal of a unique, beloved, empowering figure. They too made their feelings known online. Richard De Angelis wrote, "[B]atgirl will be walking away from more than just a rich graphic literary legacy. She will also be abandoning thousands of real-world readers who will once again be left with no one to represent them in the world of superhero comics." Julian Darius echoed that identity politics sentiment: "[I]t's certainly ironic that, while DC is championing diversity as one of the reasons for its relaunches and revisions, it's simultaneously eliminating one of the few successful disabled super-heroes." Andy Khouri too saw the retcon as a backward move: "For my generation of DC Comics readers—the kids born in the years surrounding *Crisis On Infinite Earths* (1985), which facilitated the previous line-wide relaunch—Barbara Gordon was basically never Batgirl."[11]

But no one wrote more movingly or personally about Oracle's retconning than Jill Pantozzi, who had been using a wheelchair for over 14 years due to Muscular Dystrophy:

> To say I'm disheartened and disappointed by DC Comics' decision would be an understatement and only part of my feelings on the matter. To be honest, I'm furious. I'm hurt. For all their fictionality, we let characters become very important to us and Oracle was the most important to me. When I was told the news, I cried [...]
>
> Business practices and editorial edicts aside, [I thought that] DC understood what this character meant, what she stood for and

> that she was so much more *in* the wheelchair than *out*. I know a lot of people who wanted Barbara back in the Batgirl costume simply because they felt it was ridiculous for someone to be in a wheelchair in a world where people are brought back to life on a regular basis or cured of various other illnesses just fine. A perfectly logical argument of course but what these people fail to realize is what Oracle as a character truly is [...]
>
> My point is, people being disabled is part of the real world, it is essential it be part of the fictional world as well. Especially if DC is dedicated to a diverse universe. (Pantozzi, "Oracle")

She concludes, "[G]iving Oracle back the use of her legs to bring her back to her iconic role is a travesty. Every hero has a defining moment that makes them who they are. Batgirl didn't. Oracle did" ("Oracle").

The pro-Oracle outcry serves as a remarkable affect-driven affirmation of Charles Hatfield's "online, 'cross-platform'" participatory presence of twenty-first-century fandom, whereby the superhero genre is not "simply a textual but also a social network" in which "knowledge of continuity grants cultural capital within said network," where both genre and fandom are "invested in the shared-universe model" (142). In the social media/internet era, legions of angry fans could, if not reverse corporate "meddling" with their favorite characters, make their ire over the matter loudly and immediately known. So much so that Simone, who was slated to pen the new *Batgirl* series, approached Pantozzi (with DC's blessing) about an online interview/dialogue to address the controversy. In their extraordinary exchange, the two women took pains to express both their deep love for Barbara Gordon and their respect for each other despite their inimical positions.

Simone advanced three major justifications for the change in Gordon's status, which had been presented to her by the DC editorship as a *fait accompli:* "creative potential, newsworthiness, and sheer commercial reality" (qtd. in Pantozzi, "Gail"). It was also a logical consequence of the company-wide "rewinding" of characters to an earlier period of their development. In addition, Simone presented this by now familiar rationale: "[W]hy is it that virtually every single hero with a grievous injury, or even a death, gets to come back whole, except Barbara Gordon? Why? [...] [T]he excuses to not cure her, in a world of purple rays and magic and super-science, are often unconvincing or wholly meta-textual." Finally, Simone critiqued what she called the "myth of monolithic opinion" among the disabled, characterizing Oracle's cure as a species of wedge issue for the community: "There has always been a vocal minority of PWD [people with disabilities] who wanted to see Babs healed and out of the chair, always" (qtd. in Pantozzi, "Gail").[12]

Pantozzi, perhaps out of professional respect, did not engage most of the writer's points, leaving bloggers like Eric Glover to rebut them, who put forth what seems to me the right counter-argument:

> [S]imone's implication that meta-textual reasoning has been reserved for Oracle alone—or that DC's creative integrity is somehow being questioned by it—rings somewhat false. Until now, DC hasn't healed Oracle through an outlandish plot contrivance for the same reason Superman's kryptonite allergy won't be "fixed" by permanently dressing him in a protectively lead-lined suit, and the death of Batman's parents won't be "put right" with the comics' life-restoring Lazarus Pit: In reality, using on hand sci-fi measures to erase our heroes' most pressing challenges undermines what keeps them fundamentally appealing.

He goes further: turning Simone's "cure" apologia on its head:

> Moreover, in a sense, Barbara's disability restores credibility to a universe rife with Mother Boxes that heal mortal wounds, White Lanterns that resurrect the dead, and cosmic Crises that rewrite history. The tragedy of Oracle's spinal cord injury tethers the DCU to a reality it often doesn't resemble, reflecting the danger, fragility and unfairness of real life even in the midst of the comics' zaniest sci-fi stints.

It was all for nought, of course. In the end, the decision stuck. A few months after the May announcement, Oracle disappeared, along with numerous other figures and histories undone by the "Flashpoint" mega-storyline. As Will Brooker wrote two years later: "[T]he rise of an increasingly widespread and sophisticated online culture—where legions of fans now protest the loss of Stephanie Brown's role as Batgirl or the unconvincing fix of Barbara Gordon's spine, after twenty-five years of disability—has made little difference to DC's corporate project" (69).

Conclusion: habitable (story)worlds

Barbara Gordon's journey—from able-bodied to paralyzed superheroine, and back again—casts into relief the confusions, misdirections, contradictions, paradoxes, blind spots, and animosities in the zone of encounter between gender and disability, indeed at the intersection of any multifaceted subjectivity. Gordon is a privileged heterosexual white woman as much as she is a wheelchair-user. The point where those identities conflict erupted into the light of day with the declaration of DC's "New 52" policy.

For supporters of the move, it needed no explaining: to keep "Babs" a paraplegic would be anti-feminist, a scarlet letter of her weakness, the perpetuation of an old industry pattern of women's abuse and unequal treatment. Simone proceeded from this reasoning when she told an interviewer: "Both had their backs broken. Less than a year later, Batman was fine. Batgirl—now named Oracle—was in a wheelchair and remained so for many years" (qtd. in Cochran). Note that in Simone's binary formulation, there seems no way to be both a disabled woman and "fine."

Yet throughout this chapter I have been drawing on the thought of just such women to argue the very opposite. Nancy Mairs: "[I] subscribed to the major social myths about the 'disabled woman': that she lacks the health or competence to hold a job [...] that disability can only damage, never enhance, friendships and family relationships" (126). Linton: "Although the dominant culture describes that atypical experience as deficit and loss, the disabled community's narrative recounts it in more complex ways" (*Claiming* 5). Garland-Thomson: "Because our prevailing representations constrict disability's complexities, they not only restrict the lives and govern the bodies of people we think of as disabled but also limit the imagination of those who think of themselves as non-disabled" ("Disability" 527).

To discount these disabled, self-identified feminist, "fine" women is to overlook the Disability Rights movement's goals of equality and access for all, and to ignore much of its critical theory, which developed out of and in tandem with feminist thought (Garland-Thomson, "Feminist"). We disregard this at our peril; history shows that representations which "constrict disability's complexities" have real consequences beyond the four-color world of superhero comics. In what follows I want to expound on Mairs, Linton, and Garland-Thomson's points to briefly explore the wellsprings of ableist discourses surrounding the Oracle case. We can trace Mairs's "major social myths about the 'disabled woman'"—which she subscribed to until her own impairment—and Linton's "atypical experience as deficit and loss" at least to the early twentieth-century eugenics movement, a program which attributed "pathological meanings to certain body and behavioral traits [...] thus justifying the institutionalization, sterilization and even elimination of certain individuals" (*Claiming* 2).

Historian Martin Pernick emphasizes the role of aesthetics and mass culture in shaping public discourses in the early eugenics era, despite its claims of "objectivity" (89): "They offered to eliminate ugliness while depicting as ugly everything they wished to eliminate" (97). In the twentieth-century capitalist industrial era, that which was functional was beautiful, that which was dysfunctional was ugly and marked for expulsion from a "pure" genetic pool. Notably, several important figures in the feminist and suffragist movements, including Margaret Sanger and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, were also prominent eugenicists (Lamp and Cleigh); we can still hear some of their "cure"-fixated rhetoric on the lips of their ideological descendants, as evinced by the Oracle case. I do not accuse modern-day feminists (among whom I count myself) of promoting eugenics. But as I've tried to show, the defenders of Gordon's return to able-bodied status resort all too readily to unexamined discourses that associate Oracle with pity, incompleteness, and the need to restore her to "wholeness" (all of which resonate with Mairs and Linton), ways of thinking that point to very dark corners of our past.

One can see why these links happen: throughout their history of struggle into the present day, women have been maligned as "weak," "dependent," "fragile." The fight for equality has often meant refuting such charges vociferously—and rightly so. But here lies the problem: the disabled too have long been scapegoated as something less than human, a slander as base for them as for the female gender. Would emancipation for one not suggest emancipation for the other? Unfortunately, things did not turn out that way. As historian Douglas Baynton notes:

> Still today, women and other groups who face discrimination on the basis of identity respond angrily to accusations that they might

> be characterized by physical, mental or emotional disabilities. Rather than challenging the assumptions behind the hierarchy, they instead work to remove themselves from the negatively marked categories—that is, to dissociate themselves from those people who "really are" disabled—knowing that such categorization invites discrimination. (50–1)

Such calculations, eugenicist at their root, underscore efforts supported by both majority and minority populations to "fix" physical/cognitive difference out of existence, through prenatal testing and selective abortion; genome mapping; the "Ugly Laws" of the twentieth century; corrective prosthetics like cochlear implants, resisted by some in the Deaf community as an attack on their culture (Brusky; Ouellette); forced institutionalization of the mentally ill; and other expressions of what Robert McRuer calls "compulsory able-bodiedness" (94).

In short, the ideology of ability not only molds our thoughts and actions, it even bounds the potentialities of our fictions. This is what made Oracle such an exciting, unique creation; born of the industry's most odious impulses, the character improbably grew into a genuine "roll model" and crip culture icon.

Then she vanished.

Simone's post-Oracle Barbara Gordon, while retaining her trauma, reduces the period of her paralysis to three years; then an unexplained "miracle" happened. But as Neil Kapit puts it: "The way Barbara's narration frames the miracle, it sounds like she spent the three years without her mobility just sitting on her ass moping in a dark room, but then she found this cure and she's back in the game." In the post-ADA era, it's difficult not to see this as—to use an ableist phrase—a step backward, a disheartening illustration of Garland-Thomson's "prevailing representations constrict[ing] disability's complexities," ultimately "limit[ing] the imagination of those who think of themselves as non-disabled."[13] Yet history is replete with people who put the lie to the "new" DC's impoverished, quasi-eugenicist model of disability. In closing, let us consider one.

Harriet McBryde Johnson was a real-life Oracle: lawyer, speaker, writer, and tireless disability rights activist with a neuromuscular disease, who used a power wheelchair. She depicted her life and work with remarkable candor in her debate with Peter Singer, an advocate of euthanizing disabled infants. The cover of the magazine featured her portrait, with the headline, *Should I Have Been Killed At Birth?* Garland-Thomson has written extensively on Johnson, counting her among several turn-of-the-century "visual reimaginings" of disabled people which "begin to fulfill the promise of an egalitarian order" ("Disability" 527). In one of her pieces, Garland-Thomson gets at the crux of Johnson's challenge to an able-bodied society:

> How could she say, "I enjoy my life"? This is not the life most people would claim to enjoy. Johnson has the kind of body and the kind of life that people have learned is a sentence of suffering. She is the kind of person that genetic or prenatal tests screen out for elimination, whose feeding tube gets removed, or mostly who no one wants to become. (*Staring* 191)

But as Garland-Thomson and others contend, people like Johnson are not just worthy of tolerance and consideration; they don't just deserve the proverbial place at the (wheelchair-friendly) table. They have vital contributions to make. As the bioethicist Tom Koch writes, "The argument from difference, and especially by those who are persons of difference, carries an experiential weight that gives their position a force that is unanswered by that of critics of difference" (712). The success and happiness of Johnson—like that of Oracle—does not just chip away at the Hockenberry Rule (whereby the ability of disabled people is always underestimated), it makes tantalizingly proximate Garland-Thomson's avowed end goal for her work: "I want disability sustained, not eliminated. I want disabled people present; I want a full-throated bioethics of disability presence. I want a world built with disability in it. I want a habitable world, *a world that wants disabled people in it*" ("Habitable"; my emphasis).[14]

Despite the obvious scandal, I see more than a hint of that world in fan outcry to DC's treatment of Oracle. I see, too, its glimmers in informal online discourses such as a fan debate hosted by the website *Comic Vine*. The topic: "Is Barbara Gordon Really a Woman in Refrigerator?" As the reader might imagine, the ableist speechifying and declamations of Oracle as proof of industry misogyny flew fast and furious. But, hearteningly, at least one mind was changed. Initially, @xerox-kitty wrote: "It crippled her for life. She's not only in the fridge, but she's chilling in the ice cube tray." In the course of the debate, though, @xerox-kitty amended their opinion: "[S]he was definitely in the fridge at one point, but I think she rolled her way out" (Wolfmonkey).

O brave new world, that has such people in't!

Notes

1. I wish to express my heartfelt thanks to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson for sharing her unpublished work and for her support. All emphases in the original unless otherwise noted.
2. Gordon first appeared as Gordon's niece, later his adopted daughter.
3. See my discussion in Alaniz, chapter 10. According to Moore, when he asked for permission to paralyze Gordon in *The Killing Joke,* then-editor Len Wein told him: "Yeah, okay, cripple the bitch" (Cochran).
4. Although see Rousso, chapter 1, for problems with the word "inspiring" as applied to the disabled.
5. One of them, critically, is not the love of a man. Gordon does gaze winsomely at paramour Dick Grayson/Nightwing's image on a computer monitor (8), but he makes no other appearance.
6. Oracle does not adhere to the fourth (weaker) precept: costume.
7. The quadriplegic Reeve, through therapy and medical intervention, had by the end of his life managed to restore limited movement and sensation to some extremities.
8. Volume 1 of the series ended with #127 (April 2009).
9. From "retroactive continuity," retcon can refer to publishers' benign efforts within the diegesis "to explain apparent contradictions in old comics or draw connections where there hadn't been any intended in the first place" (Wolk 69) to wholesale revampings of an entire line, "catastrophic events [...] to wipe the slate clean again and allow for a fresh start" (Jenkins 297).
10. Strictly speaking, Gordon had been offered high-tech leg prostheses by Justice League of America member J'onn J'onzz/Martian Manhunter, but she refused.
11. Oracle fans, many in the disability community, turned to other media platforms to voice their protest, including a Facebook page, "Barbara's Not Broken"; a YouTube video by disabled actress Teal Sherer, in which she plays Oracle complaining about the retcon and asking if she can at least keep her handicapped parking placard because "Parking in Gotham sucks huge balls"; and a one-act drama, *RETCONtroversy* by Natalie Zutter.
12. This pro-cure minority was presumably elated over a series of Adam Hughes sketches of Gordon, as Batgirl, 1) leaping from her wheelchair as it explodes, and 2) simply walking away from it. These initial ideas for the cover of the new *Batgirl*'s first issue were included as ancillary material in the title's first trade paperback collection, released in 2012.
13. DC and Simone's attempt to "compensate" for the loss of Oracle, the new wheelchair-using heroine Vengeance Moth/Drew Fisher, seemed

sketched-in and uninspired, and her characterization suffered for it. The "New 52" series in which she appeared, *The Movement*, was cancelled after 12 issues.

14. Garland-Thomson is here proceeding from Nancy Mairs's expressed task "to conceptualize not merely a habitable body but a habitable world: a world that wants me in it" (63).

Works cited

Alaniz, José. *Death, Disability and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014.

Baynton, Douglas. "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History." In *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*. Ed. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky. New York University Press, 2001. 33–55.

Bedard, Tony, and Kevin VanHook, et al. *Oracle: The Cure*. New York: DC Comics, 2010.

Brooker, Will. "Fandom and Authorship." In *The Superhero Reader*. Ed. Charles Hatfield et al. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013. 61–71.

Brusky, A. E. "Making Decisions for Deaf Children Regarding Cochlear Implants: The Legal Ramifications of Recognizing Deafness as a Culture Rather Than a Disability." *Wisconsin Law Review* (1995): 237–70.

Cochran, Sharon. "The Cold Shoulder: Saving Superheroines from Comic Book Violence." *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* (Spring 2007). Web.

Coogan, Peter. *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre.* Austin: MonkeyBrain, 2006.

Darius, Julian. "'Fixing' Barbara Gordon's Legs: The Politics of Retconning a Disability." *Sequart.org* (12 June 2011). Web.

De Angelis, Richard. "Adding Insult to Injury." Sequart.org (24 Sept. 2011). Web.

Dixon, Chuck, Jordan B. Gorfinkel, et al. *Birds of Prey.* New York: DC Comics, 2002.

Doane, Mary Ann. "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space." In *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader.* Ed. Philip Rosen. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986. 335–48.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "Disability and Representation." *PMLA* 120.2 (March 2005): 522–7.

——— "Feminist Disability Studies." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30.2 (Winter 2005): 1557–87.

——— *Staring: How We Look*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

——— "Habitable Worlds: Disability, Technology and Eugenics." Second Annual University of Oregon Disability Studies Forum Keynote Address. 30 Oct. 2014.

Garrity, Shaenon. "The Gail Simone Interview." *The Comics Journal* 1.286 (Nov. 2007): 68–91.

Glover, Eric. "Giver Batgirl the Chair." *BleedingCool.com* (17 July 2011). Web.

Hatfield, Charles. *Hand of Fire: The Comics Art of Jack Kirby.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012.

Henderson, Erica. *I Fail at Life* (2 July 2014). Web.

Jenkins, Henry. "Death-Defying Heroes." In *The Superhero Reader*. Ed. Charles Hatfield et al. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013. 295–304.

Kapit, Neil. "New 52 *Batgirl* #1 Review: Wasn't That Paralysis Just a Hassle?" *Handi-Capeable. New!* (7 Sept. 2011). Web.

Khouri, Andy. "Batgirl Triumphant: The Price of Restoring DC Comics' Disabled Heroine." *ComicsAlliance.com* (6 June 2011). Web.

Kleban, Camilla, and Linda K. Kaye. "Psychosocial Impacts of Engaging in Second Life for Individuals with Physical Disabilities." *Computers in Human Behavior* 45.7 (2015): 59–68.

Koch, Tom. "The Difference That Difference Makes: Bioethics and the Challenge of 'Disability.'" *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 29.6 (2004): 697–716.

Lamp, Sharon, and W. Carol Cleigh. "A Heritage of Ableist Rhetoric in American Feminism from the Eugenics Period." In *Feminist Disability Studies*. Ed. Kim Q. Hall. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. 175–90.

Linton, Simi. *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*. New York University Press, 1998.

——— *My Body Politic: A Memoir*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006.

Mairs, Nancy. *Waist-high in the World: A Life Among the Nondisabled*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.

McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York University Press, 2006.

Miller, Frank. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. New York: DC Comics, 1986.

Misiroglu, Gina, ed. *The Superhero Book: The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Comic-Book Icons and Hollywood Heroes*. Detroit: Visible Ink, 2004.

Moore, Terry, and Amanda Conner. "The Chaotic Code, Part 2: Crash and Burn." *Birds of Prey* 1.48 (Dec. 2002).

Morrison, Grant. *Supergods: Our World in the Age of the Superhero*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2011.

Murphy, Robert F. *The Body Silent*. New York: Holt, 1987.

Ouellette, Alicia. *Bioethics and Disability: Toward a Disability-Conscious Bioethics*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Pantozzi, Jill. "Oracle Is Stronger Than Batgirl Will Ever Be." *Newsarama.com* (6 June 2011). Web.

——— "Gail, Jill and Babs: A Conversation about Batgirl and Oracle." *Newsarama.com* (9 June 2011). Web.

Pernick, Martin S. "Defining the Defective: Eugenics, Aesthetics and Mass Culture in Early Twentieth-Century America." In *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability*. Ed. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997. 89–110.

Rousso, Harilyn. *Don't Call Me Inspirational: A Disabled Feminist Talks Back*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013.

Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Theory.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008.

Simone, Gail, Tony Bedard, et al. *Birds of Prey: Blood and Circuitry.* New York: DC Comics, 2007.

Simone, Gail, and Ed Benes. *Birds of Prey: Sensei & Student.* New York: DC Comics, 2004.

Simone, Gail, and Joe Bennet. "End to End." *Birds of Prey Secret Files* 1.1 (Aug. 2003): 2–21.

Simone, Gail, Paulo Siqueira, et al. *Birds of Prey: Perfect Pitch.* New York: DC Comics, 2007.

Wolfmonkey. "Is Barbara Gordon Really a Woman in Refrigerator?" *Comic Vine* (n.d.; ca. Oct. 2011). Web.

Wolk, Douglas. *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean.* Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2007.

5

Drawing Disability: Superman, Huntington's, and the Comic Form in *It's a Bird …*

Mariah Crilley

Superman is perfection. From his speed to his strength to his unwavering morality, the Man of Steel epitomizes pure ability, an unadulterated and unparalleled physical and ethical prowess. Neither his heroic progeny nor his creators, however, could fully emulate the ideals he embodies; superheroes have grown darker and more ambiguous, their heroism less straightforward and unproblematic, while the embodied lives involved in Superman's legacy have always been and will always be imperfect, mutable, and even disabled. Jerry Siegel, one of Superman's originators, was undersized and bespectacled, and the other, Joe Shuster, became blind, suffered muscle spasms, and wore cosmetic lifts. George Reeves, the Superman of the 1950s television adaptation, was afflicted with alcoholism and apparently died by suicide during his tenure as the hero.[1] Most famously, Christopher Reeve, the Superman of the 1970s and 1980s films, severed his spine after being flung off a horse. While such a tragic history may seem like a curse, these circumstances appear sinister only when contrasted with Superman's utter perfection. His invulnerability constructs all vulnerability as deviant. When read through his superheroic paradigm, embodiedness (or, the universal experience of living in and through a permeable and mortal body) mutates into a curse. Superman's legacy, therefore, is not only perfection, but also impossibility, the gap between the super and the human, ability and disability.

The intersection of disability studies and comics studies, therefore, reveals a tense history. Visual media like pictures, illustrations, and movies tend to reify rather than mitigate or reclaim dangerous stereotypes of the visibly different, constructing disability into what G. Thomas Couser calls "a stable, legible and reliable sign of a moral condition or divine disfavor" (21). Comics in particular traffic in symbolic representations of disability, wherein disfigurement and physical difference often wordlessly signify the evil villain, or, in fewer cases, imbue the hero with extrasensory powers. Ultimately, comics urge their readers to interpret disabled bodies, to expect meaning in physical difference, an alienating and stigmatizing process that inevitably seeps from the colorful pages of Batman's latest adventure to lived experiences. Yet, if, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson claims, we live in an "ocularcentric era" and "images mediate our desires and the ways we imagine ourselves," graphic narratives, as a visual medium, can, should, and must forge representations of disability that not only challenge stigma but offer new paradigms for understanding difference ("Politics" 57).

It's a Bird ..., written by Steven T. Seagle and illustrated by Teddy Kristiansen, consciously reflects on and reworks comics' misuse of disabled bodies. When the protagonist, a comic book writer named Steve, is offered the opportunity to write Superman, he initially refuses. Potentially carrying the gene for Huntington's disease, a hereditary, degenerative disorder that deteriorates the nervous system and manifests during middle age,[2] Steve cannot reconcile Superman's physical perfection with the uncertainties of his own embodiment. While the comic's primary plot follows Steve's battle with the potential of Huntington's, a search for his missing father, and a break with his girlfriend, secondary vignettes (which differ in both prose and artistic style from the primary story) reflect on Superman. Constructed as experimental drafts or sketches of the Superman project, these meditations on the character, his mythos, and his body intricately intertwine Huntington's and Superman, merging the secret deterioration of the former with the alien inaccessibility of the latter. This intersection not only exposes Superman's ideological underpinnings—the system of able-bodiedness that crafts the fiction of an immutable bodily perfection from real, decaying, and painful bodies—but also demonstrates that Superman is neither so perfect nor so normal as Steve once thought. As Steve's attitude toward Superman transforms, he decides to write the comics, reunites with his girlfriend, and begins to openly discuss Huntington's. In other words, he imagines the possibility of life with (rather than beyond) illness and disability. The comic, therefore, both refuses to romanticize Huntington's—visualizing its debilitating and material tragedy—and refuses to submit to the ideology of able-bodiedness that would damn Steve and his choice to begin a family. In this sense, *It's a Bird ...* offers a paradigm by which comics can address the tradition's embattled history with physical difference and materialize alternate futures.

Superman, or able-bodied imposter and disabled exemplar

While Superman has been read as the ideal American, immigrant, or global citizen over his long career, he also epitomizes able-bodiedness. He is the pinnacle of strength, beauty, and invulnerability. Aside from that thinly veiled plot device of Kryptonite, Superman is indestructible. He lifts cars, flies around the world, dodges bullets, and even returns from the dead. Thus, as the quintessential superhero, Superman embodies what José Alaniz decries as the "willfully blind, ablist, physique-driven aesthetic of the wider social structure" (305).[3] Between the chiseled, unstoppable, physically perfect superheroes and the narcissistic, disfigured supervillains, comics typically have relied on an insidiously facile signifying system wherein "good guys" are whole and beautiful and "bad guys" are maimed, incomplete, and ugly.[4] No character manifests and promulgates this signification, this able-bodied adoration, more clearly and unabashedly than Superman. In *It's a Bird ...* Steve initially and repeatedly declines the offer to write Superman exactly because of this physical perfection, because Superman's pure able-bodiedness fails to coincide with his own lived experiences, the uncertainty of his genetics, and anxiety for his future.

At its most basic level, able-bodiedness refers to the always-imagined state of physical normalcy. In *Crip Theory*, Robert McRuer defines able-bodiedness as a social compulsion intimately linked to the obligatory nature of heterosexuality in American culture. Able-bodiedness is not just a physical state, but an ideology, an exacting regime that sanctifies health and vitality and pities or even demonizes illness, disability, and death. It is an invisible baseline from which all difference deviates. As such, able-bodiedness is lack, the absence of disability. It has no positive definition. Yet this amorphousness ensures rather than erodes its reign; its indeterminacy "functions by covering over, with the appearance of choice, a system in which there actually is no choice" (McRuer 8). Disability and disabled identities are as much a social creation as gender or race, but able-bodiedness "masquerades as a nonidentity," unmoored from cultural and historical contexts (McRuer 1).[5] Perhaps most importantly, even the illusion of able-bodiedness is temporary. No one can be healthy and whole forever. Able-bodiedness, therefore, "is always deferred and thus never really guaranteed" (McRuer 9). As long as people yearn for the perfect body, for the impossible, able-bodiedness maintains its ideological power.

Although each vignette probes Superman or his mythos in *It's a Bird ...*, Steve takes on the Man of Steel's physicality in "Perfect," a story in which a loquacious tailor fits a silent and impassive Clark Kent for a suit. The tailor's aged, bald, and spectacled face dominates the first panel, while a broad, blurry chest and torso fade into the background. The old man fawns over Kent's "perfect proportions," crying, "in all my years I never seen anything like this" (62). As he takes Kent's measurements, standing nearly as tall as the expanse of Superman's back, the tailor chronicles a scientific study that purportedly proved children's innate preference for "folks with high cheeks, even-spaced eyes, proportional nose and what not" (63). He concludes, "See? It ain't TV makin' us look for the perfect body. It's instinct" (63). The tailor's discussion of "instinct" exemplifies the rhetoric of able-bodiedness, a discourse that not only constructs able-bodiedness as natural and normal but makes such a discourse so ubiquitous as to be unassailable. According to McRuer, able-bodiedness functions "as the natural order of things," insidiously masking all those institutions (like science, medicine, or beauty) deeply implicated in creating and policing it (1). With such work rendered invisible, able-bodiedness becomes irreproachable. When the tailor prattles about Kent's "perfect proportions" and humanity's innate preference for such perfection, he parrots the discourse of able-bodiedness, demonstrating just how naturalized and pervasive an ideology it is; even someone who in no way conforms to the ideal (short, squat, far-sighted) continues to revere and perpetuate it.

But while the tailor uncritically espouses ableism, the vignette's illustrations critique this ideology. At first the tailor dominates the story's panels, but, as he takes Kent's measurements and delivers his homily, Kent's body expands. First, his torso claims a frame, in the next his back, then shoulders, chest, forearms, and finally, in the last panel, his stoic face. In one sense, then, the illustrations function as visual, ocular proof of the tailor's discourse, both evidence of perfection and justification of ableism. Yet the vignette's illustrations also undermine such prejudice. Juxtaposing the rhetoric of able-bodiedness with a catalog of body parts, the panels and their gutters slice and offer up digestible portions of Kent's perfection. Simultaneously a semi-clinical inventory of severed, perfect pieces and a visual spectacle (an invitation to look, to ogle, to consume), the illustrations recall the troubling relationship between visibility and physical difference, submitting Superman and the able-bodiedness he represents to the visual scrutiny typically reserved for disability.

From the freak show to the medical amphitheater, vision, visibility, and visual displays have functioned as the primary tools for differentiating the disabled from the abled and for valuing the former over the latter. Exhibitions of deviant bodies in medical halls, coroner's slabs, museums, traveling circuses, etc., provide visual proof (and ethical justification) of the line between normal and abnormal, us and them. In *Staring*, a treatment on the potentially vivifying yet frequently vilified experience of looking too intently for too long, Garland-Thomson claims we "gawk" at "the prosthetic hook, empty sleeve, immobile limb, scarred flesh [...] or twitching extremity" because they "are bodies we expect neither to see, to know, nor to have" (38–9). Anesthetized by a redundant vista, our eyes are drawn to "compelling visual stimuli"—frequently visible disability (30). Yet in *The Body Silent*, Robert F. Murphy writes that physical, visible disability "robs" social interactions "of firm cultural guidelines, traumatizing it and leaving the people wholly uncertain about what to expect from each other" (87). In other words, a visible disability disrupts the social script by shattering the foundational fictions of able-bodiedness and normalcy: wholeness, impermeability, and immortality. Although we may be naturally or unconsciously drawn to stare at disability, as Garland-Thomson suggests, visibility (of the disability) and vision (of the nondisabled) frequently serve to alienate or stigmatize people with disabilities, to concretize that line between normal and abnormal, and thereby to consolidate able-bodiedness's invisible reign.[6]

In "Perfect," however, we are invited to stare at perfection, to gawk at Superman and able-bodiedness. Although the tailor's uninterrupted dialogue emphasizes and champions Superman's able-bodiedness, the illustrations subject that perfect, healthy, fit body to the dehumanizing gaze associated with disability. By measuring, severing, and silencing Superman, the illustrations not only expose able-bodiedness's artificiality, the ways in which it must be assembled (body) piece-by-(body)piece, but also enfreak able-bodiedness. The piecemeal presentation of his body, its overwhelming domination of the panels, and the reader-viewer's unavoidable gaze reframe Superman's able-bodied perfection into deviant abnormality. Superman transforms into the freak, the medical anomaly, the spectacle. On the one hand, "Perfect" simply transfers the negative significations of disability—alienation, aberration, deficiency—to able-bodiedness. On the other, however, the story, particularly the illustrations, claim Superman as disabled, as different, as outsider.

In the vignette "The Outsider," Steve compares Superman to "outsider" identities, which range from a black man, to a lesbian, to a man in a wheelchair. While Superman can jump "Right back to suit and Tie Hat and Glasses," to the clothing and invisible normalcy of Clark Kent, no costume can fully hide black skin or a wheelchair, can "bring them from the outside in" (21, 22). Yet in "Perfect," we see that Kent, even as he is fitted for a suit, cannot escape the inordinate presence of his body. By drawing this sartorial contrast in "The Outsider," Steve highlights Superman's status as outsider. He is, of course, a literal alien, the last of his race, an interloper on Earth, always and frequently painfully different. In the vignette "Alien," an unseen narrator reminds Superman that despite his heroism he is still "an alien, fool!" (108). Superman is different. His strength, speed, and body, those perfect proportions of "Perfect," are decidedly abnormal, as visibly blatant as a missing limb or wheelchair. Through a spoken-word style, the narrator chides Superman, "Get in touch with reality where folks with differences are treated egregiously, set apart from you and me, no make that just me—'cause you don't belong here, see?" (109). At first the narrator includes Superman in the "you and me" that forms the average from which "differences are … set apart," but then he corrects himself, claiming "no make that just me" (109). As the narrator's construction implies, Superman initially appears to demonstrate able-bodiedness's emphasis on physical health and normalcy, but his literal alienness and what we might call his hyper-able-bodiedness actually deviate from and even subvert the invisible normalcy able-bodiedness requires. Superman, therefore, exposes the seams in able-bodiedness. He evidences not only the fact of able-bodiedness's construction, but also the neurotic extent to which this artificiality is disguised as effortless, normal, and natural.

It's a Bird ..., therefore, invites us to perceive, to quite literally see, Superman differently. In *Carnal Thoughts*, Vivian Sobchak critiques Western culture's "emphasis on visibility and body image," claiming it "greatly overdetermines our more expansive possibilities for seeing" (187). As she argues, "the sensual thickness of lived experience has been thinned to the superficiality of two dimensions" (187). If any form can be accused of perpetuating "the superficiality of two dimensions," comics seemingly stand most guilty. Unlike conventional narratives, comics actually visualize physical difference, drawing the mysterious scar or suggestive limp, perpetuating, perhaps even concretizing, prejudicial paradigms through their visuality. Yet comics rely on illustrations; they are both appealing and critical to the form's mechanics. In many ways, these illustrations allow comics to transcend traditional genres, providing a unique site to share the untold tales and hidden lives of those without access to traditional, Western modes of representation. As Sarah Birge argues, comics not only "literally make visible" the frequently and forcibly repressed lives of the disabled, but also might be better "able to represent aspects of disability that text alone cannot, such as the crucial importance of embodiment" (n.p.). Moreover, comics' "innovative narrative geometries of text and image," or their emphasis on meaning made outside of or adjacent to language, can visualize those whose disabilities inhibit conventional communication or whose experiences simply elude translation into dominant discourse (Birge n.p.).[7] By capitalizing on the form itself, comics can render quite literally the infinite permutations and possibilities of disability, mitigating not only the form's "physique-driven aesthetic" but also the culture's.

If sight represents a privileged sense that has served to quantify and classify bodies, then Sobchak challenges this conventional means of understanding the world and offers an ontology of touch or tactility to replace it. By renegotiating our culture's sensory hierarchy, Sobchak calls for new perspectives grounded in alternative embodiments, and, perhaps unwittingly, urges a perspective based in disability, in blindness. And if comics represent a genre particularly indebted to and ingrained in ableism, then *It's a Bird ...*, by reframing the world's most famous superhero and able-bodiedness, offers an example of how we might deploy visibility to feel past the conventional limits of vision and its flattening effects and craft a space that not only tolerates disability but welcomes and celebrates the unimagined outlooks conceived in its "sensual thickness."

Superman and Huntington's, or reimagining human embodiment

From the first page of the comic, before the story has even begun, Kristiansen and Seagle link Huntington's and Superman. On an almost entirely blank page, a partially obscured hospital form dominates; under diagnosis, the word "Huntington's" appears. And while the first half of the word is almost unreadable, "ton's," the second part, is clearly visible. In particular, Kristiansen illustrates the final "s" in the disease's name in the familiar style and red of Superman's iconic "S." As the only color on the page, this "s" both draws the eye and visibly links Huntington's and Superman. The final "s" of Huntington's forges the first of Superman, fusing the two into one.

As evidenced by the first page, Huntington's haunts the text. Invisible, silent, and shrouded in secrecy, Huntington's poisons Steve's life. Or, more accurately, his family's secrecy and shame regarding the condition, derived from able-bodied ideology, warps and contaminates him. Rather than discuss it openly, for example, Steve's father simply disappears to take care of his dying sister, leaving his wife oblivious and desperate enough to demand that Steve find him. Similarly, Steve refuses Superman, splits with his long-term girlfriend, and falls into a deep depression, holing up in his home, declining calls, and sleeping incessantly. As he struggles with the possibility of having Huntington's, able-bodiedness's all-encompassing reign, its reverence for perfect bodies and denigration of all others, ensures and practically mandates Steve's shame and isolation.

Huntington's disease, formerly known as St. Vitus's dance or Huntington's chorea, refers to a hereditary, degenerative condition that typically appears during middle age. While it is most known for the involuntary movements that develop in its later stages, cognitive or psychiatric symptoms (such as depression) often precede these visible signals. Still incurable, Huntington's always ends in death, usually a slow, painful, and isolated one. Perhaps most tragically, Huntington's is hereditary, and its deaths, therefore, repeat.[8]

As such, Steve's family treats Huntington's with an impenetrable silence. In the comic's opening flashback, an adolescent Steve and his brother grow restless while they sit in a hospital waiting room anticipating their grandmother's imminent death from Huntington's. Their father placates them with a Superman comic, silencing their questions with the novelty. Yet Steve's mother complains about her in-laws' silence, asserting, "Uncle Norman and Aunt Sarah didn't tell us anything about this until two days ago" (4). Similarly, after his grandmother dies, a young Steve un-self-consciously tells a neighbor that his grandmother "died of Korea" (46). Aunt Sarah swoops in, assuaging the neighbor's confusion and her own humiliation by lying and claiming, "she passed from **heart failure**" (46). Steve, therefore, not only inherits the genetic potential for Huntington's but the deep shame ingrained by an able-bodied culture and the notorious secrecy with which Huntington's has been handled in recent memory.

Huntington's, however, was not always treated in this fashion. In "Chorea and Community in a Nineteenth-Century Town," Alice R. Wexler historicizes the condition, finding that attitudes toward it dramatically shifted between the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While the eugenics movement framed illnesses like Huntington's as "hereditary" and thereby a horrifying inevitability, Wexler claims that early nineteenth-century Americans believed that "individuals might inherit a general family disposition or diathesis for an illness" but that "triggering factors also played a critical role in determining whether someone with such a predisposition actually developed symptoms" (503). Where Huntington's was once complex in its development and a communal experience, eugenics classified it as an individual or familial fate. Examining a nineteenth-century town with an exceptionally high rate of the condition, Wexler discovers that families with Huntington's frequently held positions of authority and actively contributed to their community. Contrary to twentieth-century institutionalization movements that sought to hide physical difference, even people in the chorea stage, the most visibly different point in its progression, were a part of the public vista. The rise of eugenics, however, altered this paradigm, ushering in a secrecy that was less an internalization of eugenic ideology than a "rational and self-protective" response to doctors' probing examinations and urgent calls for sterilization (521). This ideology, which has been filtered into contemporary medical discourse, specializes knowledge of the body, removing the individual from meaningful perspectives on her own body and self, and posits disability or illness as inherently negative, a blight on humanity that must be remedied or else completely expunged. Steve's shame, therefore, derives from this rhetoric and history rather than any innate or inherent quality of Huntington's itself.[9]

Inheriting a history of family secrecy thus rooted in able-bodied antipathy, Steve receives no proper, working, or respectful paradigm for understanding himself or his lived experiences. Interestingly, comics, and, in particular, Superman, provide the foundation for redefining Huntington's and his future. Reflecting on his career, Steve claims,

> For a few years, I wrote some "mutant" comics—trying to think of exciting new **powers** the heroes' secret genetic structures might give them. I quit when I realized that some genes don't **give** powers ... they take powers **away**. The power to **walk**. The power to **sit up**. The power to **eat**. The power to **speak**. (24)

Kristiansen and Seagle overlay this meditation on genes and powers on a ghastly image of a skeletal, contorted woman, drawn in the green and gray hues of decay and the liquid ambivalence of watercolors. This grotesque image provides the first illustration of Huntington's, and Steve's words represent the first discussion of its symptoms and outcome. This woman might even be Steve's Aunt Sarah, who is rendered in a similar style as she dies from Huntington's later in the plot. As such, this scene offers an unflinching depiction of not just the condition, but also the human suffering from it. Kristiansen and Seagle avoid romanticizing Huntington's, offering a glimpse of its sincere physical hardship. This example evinces Birge's claim that comics are better "able to represent aspects of disability that text alone cannot, such as the crucial importance of embodiment," and thereby lends an important materiality to what has been predominantly discursive (n.p.).

Steve's voice, furthermore, engages in the rhetoric of superhero comics to renegotiate the terms of able-bodiedness. By engaging with Huntington's material, physical, and visible symptoms, Steve redefines the superheroic notion of powers. Where the word typically refers to invisibility, x-ray vision, or flight, Steve uses it to refer to walking, sitting up, eating, and speaking, transforming invisible benchmarks of normalcy into extraordinary feats. By elevating these purportedly fundamental human abilities to the status of powers, Steve exposes able-bodiedness's limited notion of human ability and variety. Such exclusivity fails to account for the enormous spectrum of embodied experiences and thereby stigmatizes and alienates all those whose bodies subvert its ideals. Comics, therefore, provide both materiality to representations of disability and a language and canon with which to critique the larger culture's emphasis on bodily norms.

When Steve finds his father visiting Aunt Sarah in a nursing home, he finally confronts the horrors of Huntington's. He sees his aunt, contorted, incapacitated, and incapable of speech, and he thinks, "This could possibly be **you** ... with your kids looking down at **your** twisting, writhing, body and wondering the same things about you ... and **themselves**" (107). Steve fears, therefore, the condition's generational devastation, its terrifying and unstoppable repetition. This realization transports him to a memory of that night at the hospital when his grandmother died, when he overheard his father say, "if we'd **known** about the goddamn disease—we'd never have **had** David and Steven in the first place" (112). With no context, no discussion, and certainly no framework to understand Huntington's, Steve simply hears that his father wishes he were never born. Yet, as his thoughts upon seeing Sarah reveal, Steve also fears spreading it, furthering and even ensuring its destruction and damning another generation to his own uncertainty and anxiety.

The medical establishment corroborates this fear. Because Huntington's is so devastating, most people who carry its gene "are counseled to refrain from having children" (Gin 1427). With no cure and very few resources to mitigate its progression and symptoms, doctors offer this recommendation in an effort to extirpate Huntington's. In doing so, they not only hope to save children from developing the condition, but also from having to watch helplessly as their grandparents, parents, and siblings suffer and die from it. And while I do not wish to idealize Huntington's, such counsel compounds its generational devastation; it demonizes those who would have children, constructs those children as tragic or doomed, and finally fates those very same children either to isolation or the same difficult decisions of their parents, beginning the cycle again. Steve finds himself contaminated by this logic, forced to justify his very existence, incapable of even imagining a future for himself and his genes.

As Steve begins to recognize the systems of able-bodiedness that create and mandate such prejudice, and as he reevaluates Superman, he commences to heal. After a violent altercation with his father, in whom he finds his own, impotent anger reflected, Steve addresses and assuages that generational guilt. He tells his father, "You didn't do anything wrong by having Dave and me [...] something gets all of us [...] I'd rather have known my **family**, and fallen in love with **Lisa**, and written my stories and then come down with Huntington's [...] than **not** to have lived and **missed** all that" (120). Where able-bodiedness questions the ethics of his existence, Steve inscribes his life, his experiences, his relationships, and even his disability with meaning. In the comic's final scene, Steve sits writing Superman while Lisa paints their new home a bright yellow. The pair is quite obviously together again. Approaching Lisa, Steve asks, "You wanna talk ...? About **kids**? I mean, I've been thinking it over, and—" (123). While Steve never quite articulates his newfound attitude toward children and Lisa tells him "there's plenty of time to talk later," Steve begins to imagine a future for himself. Such optimism does not lessen Huntington's significance, but demonstrates Steve's rejection of a paradigm that rejects him.

By positing a future, Steve reframes himself within a community. When he visits the gym he denigrates the "physically **perfect**" bodies of the men who "pose and make the rest of us feel ... small," opposing the perfect, able-bodied athletes from a communal "us" that includes Steve and his family's Huntington's and all other bodies and lives that fall outside the ideal (which is to say, all, eventually) (61). In doing so, Steve forms a community based on the varied experiences of human embodiment, rewriting the narrative of able-bodiedness that would construct perfect health and fitness as good and natural and would construct disease, illness, or disability as wrong, deviant, abnormal, and unnatural. In other words, Steve creates a new paradigm for lives and bodies like his own.

Conclusion, or feeling new again

When Steve attends a friend's play on Huntington's, he claims, "It's great that you got this out there. That you're so okay with it" (122). His friend, however, counters, "I'm **not** okay with it at all [...] but ignoring something doesn't make it less **real**" (122). Seagle and Kristiansen's *It's a Bird ...* manifests this profound complexity; while they visualize the real, physical, material ravages of Huntington's, refusing to romanticize the condition, they also indict the systems of able-bodiedness that capitalize on such physical difference. Ignoring these systems does not make them any less real, just as ignoring comics' ambivalent history with visual representations of difference does not make it any less real. *It's a Bird ...* engages in this history, mining the vast potential of the form and its rhetoric to depict the material realities of disability and to render quite visibly new and unimagined futures cultivated in alternative embodiments.

Through their investigation into Superman, Seagle and Kristiansen not only critique comics' seemingly indiscriminate adoption of able-bodied ideology, but also offer a new vision of perhaps the most recognized character in the world. At the end of the comic, Steve meets two children pointing toward an unseen figure in the sky. One claims, "It's a plane," while the other asserts, "It's a bird" (123). Steve crouches to their height, lifts his hand, and says, "It's **Superman**. You can see him if you look close enough, but you **really** have to **want** it" (123). In the comic's closing moments, Steve asks the children to see differently, to look beyond the limits of vision to the possibilities and new perspectives born through alternative embodiments. While I have suggested that Superman assists Steve in his struggle to acknowledge Huntington's (that by exposing Superman's vital differences Steve accepts his own), I could also, and perhaps more radically, argue the inverse—that Huntington's, in its genetic and physical variation, grants Steve a new interpretation of Superman. Embodiment forms how we live in and through the world, providing what Sobchak calls "*the material premises*" for constructing our selves and our perceptions (173). If able-bodiedness seeks to standardize such embodiments and thereby regulate or control perspectives, then Steve's squatted stance and call to see differently valorizes the radical potentiality of alternative embodiments.

Notes

1. While the authorities officially ruled Reeves's death a suicide, some sources claim the evidence points toward murder. For more on the controversy, see Larry Tye's *Superman: The High-Flying History of America's Enduring Hero*.
2. While I will return to a fuller discussion of the disease later, Huntington's is caused by both the Huntington gene (IT-15) and a 40+ repetition of the CAG sequence of DNA. Moreover, the protein p53 seems to play a part in the disease's appearance. Huntington's typically manifests during middle life after childbearing years and includes the slow deterioration of all motor skills and cognitive or affective symptoms such as depression. Although eventually incapable of the physical act of speech, most with Huntington's retain cognitive capacities until their deaths. Because no full cure exists, treatments emphasize discrete symptoms, prescribing various drugs and therapies to alleviate declining motor function, depression, etc. Yet death is inevitable. For more on Huntington's (and on how doctors are advised to understand, discuss, and treat the disease), see Bordelon.
3. Although Alaniz focuses his analysis on Marvel Silver Age superheroes in "Supercrip: Disability and the Marvel Silver Age Superhero," this claim holds true for superhero comics more generally. Moreover, Superman, a DC Golden Age hero, seems an important antecedent to his argument that, in Marvel publications of the time, powers either compensate for or constitute physical anomaly.
4. According to David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder in *Narrative Prosthesis*, narrative frequently enlists visible physical difference for its "representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight," using disability to imbue and condense meaning, to distinguish a character, propel a plot, or even create the narrative situation itself (49). Disability becomes a plot device, or, as Emily Russell glosses, "the raw material from which to construct a character" (76). As such, narrative minimizes the perspectives cultivated in alternative embodiments, reducing them to symbols to be read and interpreted.
5. While I cannot argue that the material conditions of disability are social constructions, certainly attitudes toward physical, cognitive, and emotional variations are. See Lennard J. Davis's *Enforcing Normalcy* for a historicization of disability and able-bodiedness.
6. For more on the ways people with disabilities have been displayed to fortify able-bodiedness or normalcy, see Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies* and Davis's *Enforcing Normalcy.*
7. Furthermore, Birge critiques disability scholars' habitual focus on physical disabilities, which overshadows important examinations on cognitive and emotional disabilities. And while I do not wish to inappropriately amputate and appropriate Birge's argument to suit my own, her analysis of comics' prospects for disability in general is especially constructive here.
8. Children of those with Huntington's have a 50 percent chance of developing the disease. For a brief and accessible overview of the disease and its mechanics, see Novak and Tabrizi.

9. See Wexler's longer book project, *The Woman Who Walked into the Sea: Huntington's and the Making of a Genetic Disease*, for more on Huntington's.

Works cited

Alaniz, José. "Supercrip: Disability and the Marvel Silver Age Superhero." *International Journal of Comic Art* 6.2 (2004): 304–24.

Birge, Sarah. "No Life Lessons Here: Comics, Autism, and Empathetic Scholarship." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30.1 (2010): n.p. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 2 July 2014.

Bordelon, Yvonne M. "Clinical Neurogenetics: Huntington Disease." *Neurologic Clinics* 31.4 (2013): n.p. *MD Consult*. Web. 11 Dec. 2014.

Couser, G. Thomas. *Signifying Bodies: Disability in Contemporary Life Writing*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009.

Davis, Lennard J. *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. London: Verso, 1995.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

——— "The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography." In *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*. Ed. Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggeman, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. New York: MLA of America, 2002.

——— *Staring: How We Look*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

Gin, Brian R. "Genetic Discrimination: Huntington's Disease and the Americans with Disabilities Act." *Columbia Law Review* 97.5 (1997): 1406–34. *JSTOR*. Web. 2 July 2014.

McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York University Press, 2006.

Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000.

Murphy, Robert F. *The Body Silent: The Different World of the Disabled*. New York: Norton, 2001.

Novak, Marianne J. U., and Sarah J. Tabrizi. "Huntington's Disease." *British Medical Journal* 341.7762 (2010): 34–40. JSTOR. Web. 2 July 2014.

Russell, Emily. *Reading Embodied Citizenship: Disability, Narrative, and the Body Politic*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011.

Seagle, Steven T, writer. *It's a Bird* ... Illus. Teddy Kristiansen. New York: DC Comics, 2004.

Sobchak, Vivian. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004.

Tye, Larry. *Superman: The High-Flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero*. New York: Random House, 2012.

Wexler, Alice R. "Chorea and Community in a Nineteenth-Century Town." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 76.3 (2002): 495–527. *Project Muse*. Web. 2 July 2014.

——— *The Woman Who Walked into the Sea: Huntington's and the Making of a Genetic Disease*. Ann Arbor: Sheridan Books, 2008.

6

Reading in Pictures: Re-visioning Autism and Literature through the Medium of Manga

Chris Foss

Temple Grandin famously has remarked, "I think in pictures. Words are like a second language to me [...] When somebody speaks to me, his words are instantly translated into pictures" (19). While Grandin does grant "not all people with autism are highly visual thinkers" and "people throughout the world are on a continuum of visualization skills" (28), she nonetheless believes most autistics "think in visual images" (25) and rely on "visual thinking as the primary method of processing information" (26). If many autistics think in pictures, why is it that Western culture's narration of the story of autism has relied so heavily upon the written word?

In 2003, two books notably incorporated visual elements into their autism stories. The first, Mark Haddon's *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, exploded onto the literary scene with much fanfare and before long was the most widely known autism text of its generation. One of the many aspects that fascinated readers was its use of graphics, which Haddon intriguingly interspersed throughout his narrative. The second, Paul and Judy Karasik's *The Ride Together*, received comparatively scant attention but was arguably as groundbreaking in its much more substantial integration of words and pictures, inserting comics (already a crucial component of social stories for autistics) into the critical conversation around literary autism. Both of these books suggest that more visually oriented texts might somehow constitute a more material means through which to communicate the lived experience of autism, even encourage a more properly "autistic" reading experience.

How much more so, then, should a work like Keiko Tobe's multi-volume manga series *With the Light: Raising an Autistic Child* potentially reinforce how the interplay of narrative and graphic elements characteristic of sequential art can more richly render some aspects of autistic lives that words alone simply cannot convey? Indeed, the various components of the visual gestalt (abstract background effects, bleeds, captions, motion lines, panel shapes/sizes, sound effects, speech balloons, splash pages, symbolia, et cetera) and the particular iconography unique to manga (which employs set artistic conventions, including facial features and other character design traits, to express emotions or communicate internal character states) together seem uniquely suited to provide a more complex, heterogeneous, and interactive literary experience of autism. At the same time, such a thesis risks dichotomizing visual and verbal cognitive styles, reinforcing hierarchy instead of exploring difference—which would be particularly problematic in that, as Melanie Yergeau has shown, the typical autism essay consistently has relied on binary configurations, circle diagrams, and discourse communities in its many flawed attempts to conceptualize the differences between autistics and neurotypicals.

Ralph James Savarese's provocative "Towards a Postcolonial Neurology" is anything but a typical autism essay. From beginning to end, Savarese celebrates how the "relational embodiment" (282) of nonspeaking autistic writer Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay's "alternative neurology" (280) is informed by a "kind of 'aroundness' that repairs division and the oppressive hierarchies it makes possible" (288). Savarese posits that Mukhopadhyay's recourse to the preposition *around* "suggest[s] a very different relationship, spatial and otherwise, between the storyteller and his subject" than a preposition such as *about*, which "would position both as discrete entities, with the former presumptuously claiming the latter" (286). Practicing what he preaches, Savarese lets Mukhopadhyay's own words do the talking for much of the essay, so that it comes across more as an inspired dialogue between critic and writer than anything else.

Such a critical orientation is essential when writing about autism, about autistic experience, about autistics themselves. The longstanding motto of the disability rights movement, "Nothing About Us Without Us," must inform all professional conversations *around* autism—in academic contexts as much as in educational, medical, political, scientific, and social ones. If one is to avoid "speaking *for*" instead of "speaking *with*" autistic persons, if one is to avoid replicating the typical autism essay's problematic pronouncements "about autistics-as-specimens" (Yergeau), one must actively combat "about-ism," not autism. What follows, then, will not be a detailed dissection of Tobe's comics to prove how *With the Light* embodies a more appropriate literary approach to autism owing to its predominantly pictorial composition. Instead, this essay aims to foster a suggestive, but not ultimately prescriptive, consideration of the critical nexus of autism/text around multiple interrelated points of entry by putting autistic voices in dialogue with theoretical work on sequential art.

Sarah Birge, writing on Paul Karasik's comics, establishes why sequential art is so "promising for representing the experiences of people with cognitive disabilities," asserting that, because "traditional narrative format is often seen as an essential component of constructing one's selfhood, difficulties in cognition or communication often lead to the perpetuation of stereotypes about the loss or lack of intelligence and personhood." "These factors," she continues, "make issues of representation that much more important for people with neurological differences whose experiences may not best be expressed using traditional narrative forms." Birge goes on to highlight how "comics can depict combinations of motor, sensory, emotional, social, or cognitive factors affecting a person, thereby avoiding the reduction of that person to a stereotype of one particular facet of his or her identity."

Significantly, manga texts such as Tobe's would seem even more "ideally suited for depicting cognitive disabilities in the nuanced context of embodied life" (Birge) than the typical American approach to comics embodied in Karasik's work. As Scott McCloud observes, there are some fundamental differences between Japanese manga and American comics, many of which render the former a more extensive visual experience. For example, when McCloud analyzes the types of transitions between panels in traditional American sequential art, he finds an overwhelming majority (74) feature "a single subject in distinct action-to-action progressions" (70). The only other statistically relevant types are those progressing "from subject-to-subject while staying within a scene or idea" and those progressing from "scene-to-scene" while transporting readers "across significant distances of time and space" (71). American comics, then, including those of Karasik, typically present their story through largely linear narratives, and the graphics often are limited to an auxiliary function; thus, though Birge demonstrates the extent to which Karasik "deploy[s] images to complement the textual narratives that may not always be readily available to people with autism," she does so by consistently reading his pictures in relation to the action.

McCloud breaks "the different ways in which words and pictures can combine in comics" (152) into seven main categories: word specific ("where pictures illustrate, but don't significantly add to a largely complete text" [153]), picture specific ("where words do little more than add a soundtrack to a visually told sequence" [153]), duo-specific (where "both words and pictures send essentially the same message" [153]), additive ("where words amplify or elaborate on an image or vice versa" [154]), parallel (where "words and pictures seem to follow very different courses—without intersecting" [154]), montage ("where words are treated as integral parts of the picture" [154]), and interdependent ("where words and pictures go hand in hand to convey an idea that neither could convey alone" [155]). While no category is exclusive to American or Japanese comics, linear narratives tend to rely on word-specific and duo-specific combinations, followed by additive image and interdependent ones. Manga typically offer much more of a balance between these and picture-specific, additive word, parallel, and montage combinations.

What is more, according to McCloud, while "action-to-action transitions still dominate" in manga, they do so "to a lesser degree" (78). On one hand, "subject-to-subject transitions account for nearly as many as action" (78); also, manga feature moment-to-moment sequences, which "contrast strikingly with the Western traditions" (78). The most significant difference, however, is the "substantial presence" of aspect-to-aspect sequences, "a type rarely seen in the West" (78). In these panels, sequence itself takes a back seat to mood or place (79). "Rather than acting as a bridge between separate moments," McCloud explains, "the reader here must assemble a single moment using scattered fragments" (79). When one adds to the mix a variety of other techniques developed by manga (including collage, expressionism, iconic characters, subjective motion, and word-picture linkage [210]), the overall effect is "a vision of comics very different from our own" (81), an "art -- / -- of intervals" (81–2) that emphasizes "being there over getting there" (81).

One in fact may find this more conceptual and less linear presentation not only in Tobe's splash pages, but also in *With the Light*'s numerous aspect-to-aspect sequences (such as the scene from Episode 1 of Early Elementary Years showing Sachiko feeling faint via consecutive panels providing multiple, scattered perspectives of the same moment in time). This more conceptual approach applies to the series' representation of Sachiko's autistic son Hikaru as well (for example, in Episode 2 from Later Elementary Years, where Hikaru's experience of a thunderstorm is primarily related through mood and place rather than by action). There are some distinct advantages to telling the story of autism with recourse to such "reading in pictures." At the same time, there are dangers to privileging the one over the other, and not merely because one might be seen as in effect creating a "visual" circle for autistics and a "verbal" circle for neurotypicals. As McCloud notes, because traditionally pictures have been characterized as received information and words as perceived information (49), the former may be misconstrued as simple representation and the latter as complex meaning; indeed, the historic progression from early pictured symbols to abstract alphabets would only seem to confirm this hypothesis (140–1). This in turn easily might translate into the implicit association of the visual/nonverbal/autistic with simplemindedness and, thus, with diminished (or, absent) personhood.

Yet McCloud's whole point in *Understanding Comics* is to expose the word-picture dichotomy as too reductive and to counter any hierarchizing of words over pictures. Conceptual Metaphor Theory, as advanced by cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, represents one compelling means of deconstructing the assumption that the written word is a more advanced form of expression than the image, establishing as it does how the visual is as vitally metaphorical as the verbal. In their "Pictorial Metaphors of Emotion in Japanese Comics," Kazuko Shinohara and Yoshihiro Matsunaka apply what they see as the "central tenet" of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (namely, that "metaphor, by its very nature, not only affects surface linguistic expressions but also characterizes cognitive/conceptual structure") to the study of nonverbal and multimodal metaphors in manga (266). Focusing primarily on the emotion of anger, Shinohara and Matsunaka analyze both indexical signs such as bulging eyes or reddened faces and pictorial runes such as jagged lines or bold typeface. In delineating "how pictorial runes can deviate from indexicality" (272), however, they demonstrate that "some pictorial metaphors" not only "have different and novel ways of representing" emotion but actually "have a broader range of use than verbal expressions" (273). Their primary example is a unique sign for anger in manga iconography that traces its original indexical motivation to bulging veins on the temples. As this symbol's placement is not limited to the temple area, but can be found just about anywhere on or around the face and head, at times elsewhere on or around the body, and even in word balloons, Shinohara and Matsunaka observe that a pictorial rune "can become a sort of independent sign [...] and thus can enjoy free displacement and deviation of a kind that is not seen in verbal metaphors" (282). They continue on to assert that since "it is only in the visual mode that this sign can be displaced," as "the free deviation of this pictorial rune is made possible by the visual properties of the medium in which it is used," one may conclude that "pictorial metaphor is not a mere substitution for or equivalent of verbal metaphor" (283).

For Shinohara and Matsunaka, even visual images enjoying such "free displacement and deviation" are "not arbitrary, but are motivated" (283), since all metaphor is "fundamentally embodied" (272). Fascinatingly, Savarese grounds his own delineation of Mukhopadhyay's postcolonial neurology in Lakoff and Johnson's theory as well. For Savarese, Mukhopadhyay's sense of aroundness represents "a very different experience of relational embodiment" (282)—an "autistic embodiment" that "allows for another kind of thought and language use" (275). The five main aspects of autistic embodiment around which Savarese builds his case are "atypical proprioception and sensory processing, over- and under-inclusion of certain elements in the apprehension of the environment, a drive to associate, a persistent sense of animism, and radical synesthesia" (275). The drive to associate in particular underwrites the sort of visual iconography Shinohara and Matsunaka identify with manga. Indeed, Grandin's autistic thinking in pictures supports such a view. For her, associational rather than logical thought processes (25) are an important "indicator of visual thinking as the primary method of processing information" (26), as evidenced by her own tendency toward "a kind of free association" whenever she "replay[s] the video" of a memory in her imagination (24). Further, just as Shinohara and Matsunaka insist even deviated pictorial runes are never arbitrary, Grandin suggests that while autistic symbols may be "harder to understand and often appear to be totally unrelated to the things they represent," one may grasp how they provide a "tangible reality or understanding of the world" if one apprehends how "the autistic mind works via [...] visual associations" (37).

Fittingly, perhaps, then, Tobe's texts continuously display an incredible range of both indexical signs and pictorial runes that instantly express feelings without any pretence that a more elaborate or subtle rendering might be preferable. Examples include a variety of wing ding eyes (such as loving, happy hearts or shocked, confused coils) and "speech" balloons with symbols rather than words (such as the garbled mess or the nonplussed ellipses). The series also suggests pictorial metaphor's potentially "broader range of use than verbal expressions." Examples include the visible sigh or even the ubiquitous sweat drop—after all, McCloud himself suggests visually based indicators of emotion such as sweat drops "drift into the invisible world of symbol" when they "begin to drift out of their visual context," like when sweat drops are represented as *surrounding* or flying *off*, instead of appearing *on*, a face (130). Surely one of manga's most common indexical signs for anger, in which the character almost seems to be bursting into flames, evinces a communicative power beyond that of mere verbal expression, especially as it works in tandem with more realistic features such as the furrowed brow and the open mouth.

What makes manga such an important form for revealing more expansive possibilities where literary autism is concerned, however, is that it offers an entry point for considering multiple aspects of autistic embodiment. Indeed, perhaps the most compelling argument for why manga seems so well suited for more fully expressing the lived experience of autism than traditional literary narratives stems from the fact that manga offers a decidedly multimodal reading experience, one which may engage multiple senses simultaneously and thereby encourage various forms of interaction with the text. Indeed, this is precisely what makes *With the Light* such a fascinating study, for even though its story may strike readers as rather simplistic and not particularly progressive in places, its graphic components allow for a complex, multidimensional rendering of autism.

For instance, McCloud foregrounds sequential art's potential to offer its readers a synesthetic experience of the text. Accordingly, he invokes Wassily Kandinsky's "interest in the power of line, shape and color [...] to provoke the five senses"—indeed, possibly even to "somehow unite the senses" (McCloud 123). Whether it be the sensation of movement through the subjective motion of manga (114) or visual symbols for emotion like those Shinohara and Matsunaka discuss (121), McCloud's position affirms the "distortive power of expressionism and synaesthetics" in manga both to "obscure their subjects" and to "foster greater participation by the reader and a sense of involvement" (133) with "the invisible worlds of senses and emotions" (136).

Such a sensory as well as emotional experience of the text arguably comes closer than words alone to suggesting the sort of autistic embodiment Amanda Baggs (who now goes by Amelia, or Mel, Baggs) describes in "Up in the Clouds and Down in the Valley." Baggs opens her piece by exposing language as an accessibility problem as disabling for many autistics as counters, stairs, and drinking fountains are for wheelchair users. She experiences her world primarily through sensory impressions and the patterns they lead her to perceive, and though "conventional language [...] is based on categories rather than patterns," she "handle[s]" language in the same manner she does sensory impressions, through patterns—that is, "perceiving connections without force-fitting a set of thoughts on top of them." Thus, she valorizes autistic interactions in the form of rocking and stimming, arranging objects, or tapping out rhythms as "rich and varied forms of communication in their own right." In order to "sketch out an image of how [she] perceive[s] the world, and the richness and worthiness inherent in those ways of perceiving," Baggs offers a conceptual framework in which "typical language takes place in the clouds" and her autistic expression takes place down in a valley where "each experience is like a new rainbow for every sense and each thing fits in a pattern such that [one] can perceive everything else around it." Significantly, however, she is not demarcating her own version of autistic and neurotypical circles, for she clarifies that "the richness of life" she metaphorically associates with the valley "is there for everyone, and whether one experiences it or not is not dependent on whether or not one is autistic." Her aim is to expand the standard understanding of richness beyond "what most people call thought: [the] juggling of many layers of symbol and abstraction."

This arguably is the point of her famous video *In My Language* as well. As she explains through an Augmentative and Alternative

Communication-assisted typed message that serves as her translation of the first half of the piece (which contains no words), "The way I naturally think and respond to things looks and feels so different from standard concepts or even visualization that some people do not consider it thought at all," but "it is a way of thinking in its own right." Her sort of interactive language/response is multisensorial: "I smell things. I listen to things. I feel things. I taste things. I look at things." Consequently, she continues, "my language is not about defining words or even visual symbols for people to interpret. It is about being in a constant conversation with every aspect of my environment." Baggs's video serves as an important reminder that articulations of autism and text ideally should not focus exclusively on the verbal and/or the visual.

In "The Acoustics of Manga," Robert S. Petersen delineates numerous ways in which an attention to sound expands our appreciation for the "multimodal ways words and pictures are formed and combined" (163) in sequential art. Indeed, according to Petersen, manga is the most effective type of comics in terms of "exploit[ing] the dimensions of sound" (163). This is in large part because "Japanese manga use certain features in Japanese language that give the sounds in manga exceptional dynamic expression" (165), where sounds are neither redundant nor incidental but rather provide "force and dimension to the dramatic action" (166). For instance, "Unlike Chinese characters, which largely represent ideas, the separate sets of syllabary characters [in Japanese] represent sounds that can be strung together or stand alone" (165). Not only this, but "the code-switching between Hiragana and Katagana remains to this day an important dynamic in manga sounds" (169). He explains, "Hiragana is most often employed to suggest internal noises that are sensual and of a personal nature, such as chewing, breathing, and the sound of heart beats, whereas Katagana is used to suggest the harsher external world of sounds that bombard us" (169). For Petersen, "The reason sounds in manga are so rich and varied is also in part due to" the "much wider range of onomatopoeic expressions" in Japanese (166), which includes "words that mimic psychological states and non-auditory sounds" as well as "words that mimic real sounds" (167).

In all these ways, sound becomes an essential aspect of one's visual experience of manga. As a result, one is required to engage in multimodal reading throughout Tobe's series. For example, in the aforementioned storm scene, Hikaru's piercing scream of "AAAAAAGGGGH!" in its jagged speech balloon works together with the graphic representations of the booms, cracks, flashes, and rumbles of the thunder and lightning. Also, during the scene from Episode 2 of Birth/Infancy in which one of Hikaru's classmates yanks at Sachiko's umbrella and knocks her over, one moves from the graphic rendering of the dash to the tug and then the crash (where sound practically leaps off the page with Sachiko's "OW ..." while one simultaneously experiences motion in the tipping/tipped panel with the starred border). Such a multisensorial experience of the text is especially effective in representing Hikaru's engagement with the world around him. Tobe employs many compelling combinations of motion and sound to communicate how Hikaru experiences his environment; these scenes not only strikingly render the sensation of the sound and motion but also powerfully pull readers into Hikaru's own point of view (providing an acute awareness of what precisely is so arresting for him about these particular combinations). The numerous scenes in which Hikaru is overwhelmed by sensory overload and responds with an outburst are especially noteworthy. For instance, in the portrayal of his reaction to his grandfather's memorial service in the very first episode of the series, there is a palpable if also surreal presence of all the sounds depicted, even those of the gong and chants (which, interestingly, in effect are rendered mute by the lack of corresponding syllabary characters), as they eventually swirl into a vortex of noise that Hikaru simply cannot escape. Another powerful example is the terrible scene from Episode 2 of Birth/Infancy where Sachiko lashes out at and hits her son. Again, there is a graphic progression from Hikaru's waaahs to his thuds and then to Sachiko's whap, before the return to the waaahs. The equivocal second panel, overlaid by the sounds of the thuds but depicting only a flash of force and/or emotion, is particularly striking: is it Hikaru's kicking and pounding or Sachiko's rising anger one finds abstractly represented here?

Petersen asserts, "The effective use of sound in manga produces a drama and vitality to the work where the reader not only subvocalizes the sounds, but also becomes more attuned to silences" (170). This notion of psychological or nonauditory sound is one of the most suggestive dimensions to the acoustics of manga. Dawn Prince's "The Silence Between" speaks to the productive possibilities of approaching communication/language through the dialectic of sound and silence. Interestingly, whereas Baggs conceives of her sensory-based conversation with her environment as another type of language, as her native language, Prince is more concerned with delineating not two different languages but two different language uses. Significantly, though, both Baggs and Prince (the former identifying language with reproach and the latter with violence) object to how language is conventionally understood and employed.

Prince's experience of autistic embodiment leads her into a powerfully sensory relationship to/with language: "each word was onomatopoeic and tasted and smelled." Indeed, "language was like food," a "necessary element for survival and a web of interdependencies." Frustratingly, however, "this glorious language fabric," "the world that words made whole," ended up "always rent asunder by [her] attempts to make language a means of connecting with speaking people." "Knowing enough to see that I experienced language in a way that was very different from others," Prince explains, "language as a phenomenon tore me away and reinforced my social disabilities." She suffers this tearing in large part because, like Baggs and Mukhopadhyay, her world is a profoundly animistic one. For instance, she writes of language being "blended inextricably to context and memory," of how "this melding represented the most important thing in the world," since "everything, from bathrooms to snails [...] had language." According to Prince, then, "If a thing existed, it existed as a living part of language and had a deep understanding of its place in the vibrations of speech, in the vibrations of existence. This whole cloth of speech and living things made my world a magical place." Yet most other people did not share this relationship to language. For them, "language was a kind of weapon," a knife used to "cut up the world" and to "cut groups of people one from another." In language so used, "the unmistakably violent brackets of racial epithets and the kind of simple dichotomies of speech that boil down to 'us' and 'them'" foster "division" rather than "connection."

One of the first examples Prince turns to by way of explanation is the conversations she used to have with her grandmother about "Japanese babies born into Buddhism." She relates that her grandmother "would calmly state that [these babies] were all going to hell" and then "would sigh mournfully, [...] accepting the sad fact that they might grow up to be good people but that it would make no difference in the end." Even as a child Prince read in her grandmother's sigh "another shade of language," a barely audible sound which nonetheless spoke volumes. She was horrified and offended by her grandmother's opinion, and attempted to expose its flaws. Intriguingly, given the continued attribution of diminished or nonexistent personhood to nonverbal autistics in particular, one of Prince's objections focused on babies who died when they still "had no means to say out loud, in the fashion accepted as normal, whether they believed in Jesus or not." Her grandmother, Prince reports, "never had a spoken answer" for any of these objections, and this silence actually led Prince to an important insight: "I knew that language was as important to other people as it was to me, but in a dangerous way. The silence between their words was just as full of cutting as the silence between my words was a place of connection."

It is this knowledge that leads Prince to focus on "creatures the normal world imagines silent": "the autistic child, the ape in the zoo or in the laboratory, the homeless, the dogs in cages." Tellingly, she characterizes pain as "a language without any silence or opportunity for connection." Her hope is that "the time of silence without meaning is drawing to a close," that "autistic people, and others that have been beyond understanding until recently, will be the natural interpreters of an important patois." For this hope to be realized, for language to encourage connection rather than division, more people will need to acknowledge how other types of communication, such as the language of primates ("punctuated" as it is "by long, integrating silences"), represent forms of expression "rich in concepts of being still in the world and not designed to cut things apart."

McCloud's celebration of comics is ultimately a utopian one. In his concluding chapter, he proffers the reason this medium is so important "lies deep within the human condition" (193), which for him is dominated above all by the fact that "we all live in a state of profound isolation," that "no other human being can ever know what it's like to be you from the inside" (194). "All media of communication," McCloud continues, "are a by-product of our sad inability to communicate directly from mind to mind" (194), but he insists "the wall of ignorance that prevents so many human beings from seeing each other clearly can [...] be breached by communication" (198). He further believes "the dance of the visible and the invisible [which] is at the very heart of comics" can, "through the power of closure," effect a collaborative partnership in meaning-making, in communication, between "creator and reader" (205).

As McCloud establishes early on, closure (which he defines as the "phenomenon of observing the part but perceiving the whole") is a fundamental human activity that "we all depend heavily on" to make sense of the world around us (63). For him, sequential art is "a medium of communication and expression which uses closure like no other," "a medium where the audience is a willing and conscious collaborator and closure is the agent of change, time and motion" (65)—and the key to closure in comics is the "space between the panels," the gutter (66). According to McCloud, "despite its unceremonious title, the gutter plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics," for there, "in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea" (66). That is, while "comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments," closure "allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality" (67). Thus, "If visual iconography is the vocabulary of comics, closure is its grammar. And since our definition of comics hinges on the arrangement of elements -- / -- then, in a very real sense, comics *is* closure" (67).

McCloud's notion of closure and the vital importance it confers upon the space between bears articulation both with Prince's theorization of the silence between and with Petersen's delineation of the acoustics of manga. Petersen's work, in fact, while certainly complementary to McCloud's in most respects, offers a crucial qualification of McCloudian closure. While closure invokes the bridging of gaps toward the sort of unification essential to the full equality that only can come with common understanding, it also carries within its concomitant sense of completion the suggestion of a closing off of possibility, a resolution to relational difference. Drawing upon the work of Hans Gumbrecht and Susan Sontag, Petersen theorizes a "narrative erotics" to manga, a dimension of the text put in play by "those moments when the narrative becomes embodied through a sensual presence" (165). This Gumbrechtian presence ultimately "defies interpretation," for "the subject here is not the meaning of sounds in the narrative, but how the presence of sound creates a potentiality or potency within the narrative" (Petersen 165). Answering Sontag's call "to look beyond meaning to the erotics of art, how art is embodied with emotional force and presence that cannot be entirely reduced to meaning," Petersen posits that the acoustics of manga represent a "dynamic presence" (164) within the text's narrative structure. Significantly, because this space "is not in opposition to meaning," but instead actually "creates a space for meaning to accrue" (165), it constitutes its own important patois, one in which space is preserved rather than closed up/off. The point, then, is not that connection is undesirable, rather that the sort of meaning one makes together need not be complete, unified, or symbolic in nature, but also fragmentary, multiple, or nonsymbolic.

Petersen's emphasis on embodiment and presence returns one full circle to the nonspeaking Mukhopadhyay, whose persistent animism and sensory cosmopolitanism contribute to a belief "that he is connected to all sorts of things" (Savarese 280). As Savarese shows in his discussion of Mukhopadhyay's metaphor of "the mind tree," this sort of connection is primarily experienced through "sensory dislocations" that "facilitate a kind of extraordinary diffusion of thought and feeling" (281)—in Mukhopadhyay's own words, "maybe in my roots, maybe in my bark or maybe all around my radius" (*Mind* 169). Though Mukhopadhyay's mind tree "cannot ask," it can "hope," "imagine," and "love" (*Mind* 169), and "when things are open for you to imagine, [...] you are open to imagine any number of impossibilities" (*Mind* 191). Savarese asserts that "the great compensation for Tito's many challenges is precisely his capacity to disrespect and, thus, destabilize such boundaries, including, to a large extent, the boundary between self and other" (282). Having just referenced a quotation in which Mukhopadhyay discusses how "delicate" is the "boundary between imagining and experiencing something [...] around [his] body or presence" (*How* 23), Savarese goes on to extrapolate how *around* for Mukhopadhyay not only "convey[s] a very different experience of relational embodiment" but also "speaks of the pressure that both his imagination and his memory put on a stable positioning of the self or 'presence'" in which "neither 'the real' nor 'time' obtain with their customary certainty" (282).

Later on, Savarese quotes a passage in which Mukhopadhyay spoofs the clinical use of *autism* as a "fancy word" in order to delineate how for Mukhopadhyay "autism becomes less a signifier of pathology than a term for his sense of 'extreme connection' or animistic empathy"—an application Savarese explicitly identifies with Prince's "refusal to allow language [...] to 'cut up the world' or 'cut groups of people one from another'" (284). Then, a bit further on yet, Savarese cites two more crucial passages from Mukhopadhyay, one in which he experiences a bucket filling with water and another in which he recalls associating the word *banana* with clouds. In the first, Mukhopadhyay establishes a distinction between his own "branching thoughts" and the "one conclusion" most would deem the typical, if not correct, response (*How* 96). In the second, he contrasts how he would "form wrong associations between words and objects" and how education "helped [him] settle [his] dispute with nouns" (*How* 214). For Savarese, not only is Mukhopadhyay's "process of apprehension" through his branching thoughts "much more evocative [...] than that 'one conclusion,'" but further, Mukhopadhyay's dispute with nouns "remains partially open" in that "the signifiers behave more provisionally" and *map around* (Mukhopadhyay's own phrase) "what they signify, not racing to subdue it" (287). In both cases, openness and multiplicity trump correctness and singularity.

According to W. J. T. Mitchell, "all media are mixed media, combining different codes, discursive conventions, channels, sensory and cognitive modes" (95). This idea undergirds Mitchell's consideration of composite art, or what he calls the "image/text." He insists, "The key thing, in my view, is not to foreclose the inquiry into the image/text problem with presuppositions that it is one kind of thing, appearing in a certain fixed repertoire of situations, and admitting of uniform descriptions or interpretive protocols" (90). In other words, Mitchell hates constrictive circles as much as Yergeau does. Since he views language itself as a "medium" [that is, as "a heterogeneous field of discursive modes"] rather than as a "system" [that is, as "a univocally coded scheme open to scientific explanation"] (97), the image/text itself is "neither a method nor a guarantee of historical discovery" but instead "more like an aperture or cleavage in representation" (104). Thus, "the image/text is not a template to reduce these things to the same form, but a lever to pry them open. It might be best described, not as a concept, but as a theoretical *figure* rather like Derrida's *différance*, a site of dialectical tension, slippage, and transformation" (106). It is precisely such an approach that this critical articulation of autism and manga supports—the opening up of apertures, the mapping around of space from which to consider multiple possibilities and transformations, as opposed to the closing up of circles, of space cordoned off in the name of systematic protocols and classifications.

Works cited

Baggs, Amanda. *In My Language*. Web. 4 July 2014.

——— "Up in the Clouds and Down in the Valley: My Richness and Yours." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30.1 (2010). Web. 4 July 2014.

Birge, Sarah. "No Life Lessons Here: Comics, Autism, and Empathetic Scholarship." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30.1 (2010). Web. 4 July 2012.

Grandin, Temple. *Thinking in Pictures and Other Reports from My Life with Autism*. New York: Vintage, 1995.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Kitchen Sink Press/Harper Perennial, 1993.

Mitchell, W. J. T. *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Mukhopadhyay, Tito. *The Mind Tree*. New York: Arcade, 2003.

——— *How Can I Talk If My Lips Don't Move?* New York: Arcade, 2008.

Petersen, Robert S. "The Acoustics of Manga." In *A Comics Studies Reader*. Ed. Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009. 163–71.

Prince, Dawn. "The Silence Between: An Autoethnographic Examination of the Language Prejudice and its Impact on the Assessment of Autistic and Animal Intelligence." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30.1 (2010). Web. 4 July 2014.

Savarese, Ralph James. "Towards a Postcolonial Neurology: Autism, Tito Mukhopadhyay, and a New Geo-poetics of the Body." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 4.3 (2010): 273–89.

Shinohara, Kazuko, and Yoshihiro Matsunaka. "Pictorial Metaphors of Emotion in Japanese Comics." In *Multimodal Metaphor*. Ed. Charles J. Forceville and Eduardo Urios-Aparisi. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2009. 265–93.

Tobe, Keiko. *With the Light: Raising an Autistic Child*. Trans. Satsuki Yamashita. 7 vols. New York: Yen Press/Hachette, 2007–10.

Yergeau, Melanie. "Circle Wars: Reshaping the Typical Autism Essay." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30.1 (2010). Web. 4 July 2014.

7

Graphic Violence in Word and Image: Reimagining Closure in *The Ride Together*

Shannon Walters

Violence, pain, abuse, torture—these experiences are often perceived as being difficult to communicate through verbal or written channels of language. Elaine Scarry, for example, identifies an "inexpressibility" and "unsharability" of pain that can make pain difficult to communicate or represent, especially in instances of extreme violence (3–4). However, as Scarry notes, one aspect of language that can make pain more representable is the use of a visible referent—the image or signifier of a weapon that inflicts pain on a body. Yet, there are relative advantages and disadvantages to this alternative strategy. A main disadvantage is that a visible referent can easily be "spatially separated from the body," thereby permitting "a break in the identification" between the referent and its effects on bodies (17). In this case, visual representation also becomes problematic.

As disability theorist Simi Linton has argued, naming oppression is a crucial first step to mounting resistance to it. For disabled people—who have argued that political, cultural, and social activism and representation are tied closely to the body and its experiences on individual and collective levels—exploring the challenges regarding the inexpressibility of pain (especially when pain is the result of violence perpetrated against disabled bodies) is a particularly important project. People with disabilities are much more likely than nondisabled people to be hurt or abused, to become a victim of a violent crime. In 2008, the age-adjusted rate of violence against disabled people was almost twice the rate of violence against nondisabled people (National Crime Victimization Survey). Serious violence—rape, sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated assault—accounts for

50 percent of this violence against disabled people. People with cognitive disabilities experience the highest rate of violent victimization (30 per 1000). It is likely that people with cognitive or intellectual disabilities are particularly vulnerable to violence because bodily pain (already so difficult to express, share, or communicate) may be particularly difficult to explain for a person whose intellectual disability affects communication. Even more troubling, people not perceived to be of "sound mind" who attempt to express pain are often doubted, dismissed, and disbelieved.

This is the challenging situation that Paul and Judy Karasik, in *The Ride Together*, find themselves in when they discover in 1996 that the facility where their eldest sibling David, who is autistic, has been living is under investigation for widespread physical and sexual abuse of residents. Brook Farm is where David, in his forties in the 1990s, has resided seemingly peacefully for over 14 years. What follows in the final chapters of Paul and Judy's memoir is a frustrated attempt by the siblings to understand the abuse, the situation leading up to it, and its aftermath—an attempt that is pursued both in Judy's traditionally written chapters and Paul's graphic chapters. In this essay, I focus on Paul's graphic attempts to deal with a situation that is particularly difficult for the family to understand. Especially challenging for the family is the fact that David chooses not to disclose whether or not he was abused, a circumstance that deeply affects Paul's creative process. I trace this effect on his graphic chapters, showing how Paul attempts to depict his relationship with his brother, including their shared past, in light of the revelation of the abuse at Brook Farm. Amid the uncertainty of whether David was abused, Paul revisits episodes in the past with his brother involving physical confrontation and a scene of family violence. I explore the strained interplay of words and images in these panels, investigating how violence affects the assumed harmony between these multimodal elements for Paul. I also explore Paul's attempt to represent the potential abuse that David experiences at Brook Farm, arguing that it demonstrates a reimagining of the function of graphic-semiotic closure in comics beyond neurotypical limits. In short, when Paul confronts an absence of meaning—David's refusal to disclose whether abuse happened—he is forced to imagine other means of expression, forging alternative and non-normative approaches to comics in word, image, and closure.

Graphic disability

Discussions regarding the ethics of representation in the context of disability, particularly cognitive or intellectual disability, occupy a particularly lively area of inquiry in disability studies. In the context of non-graphic disability life writing, G. Thomas Couser identifies a hybrid of genres called "relational life writing" which includes "a personal narrative that concerns a subject with whom the writer has a preexisting close relationship" (100). *The Ride Together*, with its subtitle of a "memoir of autism in the family," is relational life writing written and drawn from the sibling perspective, and joins other graphic memoirs and texts such as *Epileptic* (David B.), *Circling Normal* (Karen Montague-Reyes), *Tangles* (Sarah Leavitt), and *Our Cancer Year* (Harvey Pekar and Joyce Brabner) that focus on telling the story of disability or illness in graphic form from a perspective closely situated within a family context and/or told from the perspective of family members close to the person with a disability or illness. These texts differ in their authorships and reflect diverse representational relationships between subjects, although the Karasiks, like David B., focus on the sibling relationship in the disability experience. *The Ride Together* is a text by siblings who have a large amount of representational authority over their autistic brother, although when David decides not to disclose whether he was abused, he frustrates his siblings' attempts to represent his experience.

Among several of these graphic memoirs, the combination of written and graphic expression has been celebrated as a unique and non-normative approach that can more accurately or complexly convey the experience of disability. As Susan Squier describes in an analysis that includes *The Ride Together*, "as a medium combining verbal and gestural expression, comics can convey the complex social impact of a physical or mental impairment, as well as the way the body registers social and institutional constraints" (74). Sarah Birge also analyzes *The Ride Together* and elaborates on the specific context of cognitive disability, writing that the "unique forms of comics are especially promising for representing the experiences of people with cognitive disabilities." In this perspective, the unique combination of verbal and graphic depiction in comics invites more possibilities for disability representation, especially in the context of cognitive disability.

Although coordination between graphic and written features of comics has been celebrated as adding representational possibilities to the disability experience, to a certain extent this perspective can be seen to rest on an approach that assumes a natural harmony expected between words and images, a balance that does not always exist in the context of disability, particularly when trauma or violence is also involved. Comics theorist Scott McCloud calls the interplay between word and image one of the most crucial functions of comics—"'good' comics are those in which the combination of these very different forms of expression is thought to be harmonious" (47). In a depiction of this assumed natural and symbiotic relationship, McCloud draws on images of ability to represent these elements in dance and figure-skating scenes, explaining, "in comics at its best, words and pictures are like partners in a dance and each one takes turns leading" (156). Able-bodied figure skaters illustrate this harmonious relationship for McCloud, with the image of a strong male skater holding up a slim female skater.

Although the verbal and graphic features of comics often add representational possibilities, disability frequently operates in contexts that are more troubled and less clear, in which meaning confronts a void or is more difficult to pin down, particularly when trauma is involved. As Dale Jacobs and Jay Dolmage assert in their examination of disability and comics, it is necessary to explore the "difficult articulations" of how "both self and trauma/disability are constructed in the multimodal textual space of a comics memoir" (69). When the Karasiks confront the possibility that David may have been abused, but cannot ascertain for sure what has happened because David does not disclose, they confront a "difficult articulation." They struggle to understand a potentially horrific situation, but are unsure of how to do this. Tracking this uncertainty in the graphic elements of the memoir shows possibilities for questioning normative assumptions regarding the combination of word and image in comics and for interrogating the neurotypical foundations of closure.

Graphic violence

When the family faces small-scale violence inside the Karasik home and larger-scale violence outside the home in the revelation of the abuse at Brook Farm, the generative and harmonious interplay of verbal and graphic expression often assumed to operate in the typical structure of "good" comics seems to break down. In his graphic chapters, Paul repeatedly depicts scenes in which he and David have physical altercations as children and adolescents. For example, in an early graphic chapter that tells of the family's trip to a doctor to receive David's diagnosis of autism, Paul depicts David hitting him as they fight in the backseat as young children. This panel is a relatively typical comics panel, the last of three panels depicting Paul singing while David grows increasingly frustrated. It has regular borders and matches the size and shape of the previous two panels detailing the scene. When David hits Paul, however, his fist is emphasized within the panel with jagged lines to denote the physicality of the scene (20). There are no words in this panel to elaborate on or explain this physicality. Rather than a harmony between word and image, the graphic elements of this physicality stand alone.

Later, in Paul's early adolescence, he depicts another scene of physicality between him and David that builds on this early scene. This next scene of physicality shows the brothers literally butting heads when David steps on a comic book that Paul is reading. The jagged lines that had appeared in the previous chapter's panel around David's fist are emphasized in this panel, forming the entire border for the scene of the head butt. As McCloud relates, the use of lines can be a way for a comics artist to make emotion visible, with sharp, jagged lines connoting tension and anxiety (118–19). The jagged shape of this panel stands out, occupying the center of the page, amid other panels with regular borders, sizes, and shapes. The implication is that the violence is progressing—whereas the previous panel had blended into the other panels on the page, the jagged lines of the head-butting scene are more conspicuous. Again, there is little opportunity for a relationship between word and image. Whereas the previous panel has omitted words altogether, the only word in this panel is the onomatopoetic "Konk" when the brothers bump heads (67).

Rather than the assumed harmonious relationship between word and image, in these panels of small-scale family violence, words are nearly absent. Instead of a symbiotic relationship in which words and images take turns leading or supporting each other, images and line composition seem to stand in as the only way to represent the increasing physicality between the brothers. As noted above, the singular word that does accompany the head-butting image, "Konk," mainly operates onomatopoetically. Rhetorically, onomatopoeia attempts to make a concordance between sound and meaning. Paul's use of onomatopoeia in a scene of violence creates rhetorical effect by coupling a sound with a movement, but it does not offer any elaboration or interpretation that would contribute to a more developed meaning about the violence. Paul does not know how to represent the physicality between him and David in written expression beyond the purely sensory information of onomatopoeia, and thus he relies instead on graphic expression. Similarly, Paul is not able to relate emotional meaning in words and depends on his use of lines to suggest the rawest of emotional content in his panels' messages. In short, words seem to fail at representation in these panels and images are the only way for Paul to render the escalating physicality between the brothers. Rather than the assumed harmony between word and image that characterizes effective comics, in scenes of violence there is hardly a relationship between them at all. In the context of disability and violence, the able-bodied metaphor with dancers and skaters that McCloud uses to represent harmonious word–image relationships does not hold up. Also, rather than representational possibilities between words and images proliferating in the context of disability and comics, as noted by Squier and Birge, these possibilities seem to narrow in the context of disability and violence, as images rather than words take on full representational responsibility.

While the episodes of physicality that Paul relates may be read as within the realm of typical sibling rivalry, they also indicate deeper undercurrents of tension in the family. Both Judy and Paul depict David as occasionally violent, but also attribute violence to the entire family. When David is asked to leave a residential facility named Camphill because of his violent outbursts, Judy goes into detail describing what it was like when David was out of control: "He started by rapping and fiddling his fingers on his skull, as though he were revving an engine. If whatever was going on inside him got worse, he attacked people—it didn't always make sense who. He could pull your head to his and grind his forehead against yours, repeating the names of people who didn't exist outside of television. It hurt" (81). However, as Judy relates, violence was a somewhat normal part of life for the family, even when David was not present. Judy describes the house with David away at a residential program: "with our brother gone, Michael and Paul and I got into more fights, especially physical ones. It was although the household had its required level of surface tension and we got to fill it in when David was away" (77).

This general sense of tension culminates in a disturbing scene at a family dinner, which Paul represents graphically. The Karasik parents, Monroe and Joan, discuss politics, while the neurotypical children—Judy, Paul, and Michael—variously ask questions and ignore their parents in favor of teasing one another. David, stuck on repeating the names of the barbers who cut his hair, is drawn as growing increasingly frustrated as he is ignored. Monroe eventually yells at David, exclaiming, "Enough already about Vito," which sends David into a flurry of sounds and hand-twiddling actions (40, 44). In a panel that intensifies jagged lines such as those drawn in the head-butting scene, David is depicted in a borderless panel, his face and hands surrounded with a jumble of jagged lines, with short words jutting out in sharp text balloons: "CLAP! CLAP! CLAP!" and "WILBUR! CLEM! LUKE! CLAP!" (44). In the next panel, he lunges at his mother, grabbing at her as she defensively tries to grab his arms. Monroe, a shadowy figure, cries, "Stop," and, on the next full-page borderless panel is depicted grabbing and then pushing David back into his chair, presumably while trying to deflect his advancement toward Joan. A smaller pull-out panel focuses on Monroe grabbing David, while a larger borderless image shows them scuffling as David falls. The only word on this page is "Crak!" which accompanies another small pull-out panel that focuses in on the visual of the chair breaking with David's fall (45). After the scuffle, the family dinner breaks up. Paul, looking at the chair, remarks, "Gee, it's all splintered" as he helps clear the table (47). Monroe goes to the study to mull over what happened in relation to the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur, while Joan is pictured repairing the broken chair with glue, declaring it "good as new" (50).

In this scene, the jagged lines in other scenes of violence in the family seem to progress to full fragmentation, as the main image of David and Monroe tussling in the chair splinters into smaller, refocused images of the moment of confrontation and its aftermath—the broken chair. In Scarry's terms, the chair acts as a visible referent for the scene of violence enacted during the family dinner in which little to no verbal representation is used. As with the head-butting scene, the only word in this scene of violence is onomatopoetic and the focus is on the image of the chair, in the middle of the page. The chair is emphasized in a pull-out panel depicting the struggle; it is what Paul immediately comments on after the dinner abruptly ends; and it is what Joan fixes directly following dinner.

As Scarry describes, visible referents of violence can operate productively in their proximity to the body, revealing connections between bodies and violence that need to be explored. These visible referents can also be "spatially separated from the body" in ways that deter connection and identification (Scarry 17). Paul's graphic representation of violence works between these two poles, focusing on the chair as a visible referent for violence but de-emphasizing David's experience. Paul strains to represent any emotional or physical trauma David might be feeling—David's back and undetailed profile are shown when he has fallen onto the floor and only his foot is shown as he is seen walking away (46). Yet the chair, although fragmented, is represented multiple times. As with previous scenes of violence, words are also nearly completely absent from any panels depicting the violent scene; no one talks about or narrates the physical altercations depicted. Any assumed harmonious relationship between words and images has completely broken down for Paul in this scene of family violence, with full fragmentation even evident among the graphic elements of the scene. As the chair breaks and splinters into multiple images, Paul begins experimenting with new modes of graphic and written representation.

Reimagining closure

This small-scale family trauma is compounded years later when the family discovers the larger-scale abuse at Brook Farm, David's longtime residential facility. The deterioration of the assumed harmony between word and image in previous scenes of violence breaks down more completely in the aftermath of the revelation of abuse at Brook Farm, during which the Karasiks experience a fuller crisis of meaning and Paul begins to experiment more fully with word and image, particularly involving the function of closure. When asked about his experience at Brook Farm, David says that he "would rather not talk about it" (182). Paul and Judy struggle intensely with this response; not knowing whether David experienced abuse triggers a sense of confusion in them that is reflected in their respective written and graphic expressions. In Jacobs and Dolmage's terms, they are living through a "difficult articulation," experiencing a challenge in how to respond to a trauma they are not even sure happened. To a certain extent, when the family deals with this lack of knowledge regarding David's potential abuse, they experience a frustration in closure, both in their everyday life and in their written and graphic expression. Specifically, David's non-disclosure forces Paul to imagine alternative types of graphic closure.

As McCloud explains, closure—the "phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole"—is one of the most important interactions between text, artist, and audience in comics (63). With comics, closure is the way that a reader makes a mental leap between panels, closing the gap between what is shown and what can be known. Ideally, "closure allows us to connect" the separate moments between panels and to "mentally construct a continuous, unified reality" (67). This mental construction is assumed to be neurotypical in McCloud's formulation, modeling a limited and somewhat cognitively normative approach. The mental construction of a "continued, unified reality" can vary significantly according to neurocognitive status and can even call into question the possibility or value of such a reality itself.

To illustrate closure and the space between panels, called the gutter, McCloud draws a panel featuring a man wielding an axe, announcing, "Now you die," while chasing a terrified-looking man (66). The next panel is simply an urban night scene, with the sound "eeyaa!!" written across it (66). The assumed neurotypical closure is that the man is murdered. Elaborating on closure, McCloud concludes that "[e]very act committed to paper by the comics artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice. An equal partner in crime known as the reader. I may have drawn an axe being raised in this example, but I'm not the one who let it drop or decided how hard the blow, or who screamed, or why. That, dear reader, was your special crime, each of you committing it in your own style" (68). This style, however, remains uninterrogated as normative and neurotypical. The process of observing how parts fit into a whole, for example, might be different for people with different cognitive styles. An autistic reader may interpret the space between two panels differently from a neurotypical reader.

As McCloud suggests, closure happens almost automatically and perhaps more easily in written text: "Closure in comics fosters an intimacy surpassed only by the written word, a silent, secret contract between creator and audience" (69). From this perspective, even reading, speaking, and writing form a kind of automatic closure. Again, this closure is assumed to be neurotypical. McCloud describes the closure that happens in graphic expression in relation to the everyday acts of closure that we supposedly all (at least from a neurotypical perspective) make easily and naturally. He explains, "In our daily lives, we often commit closure, mentally completing that which is incomplete based on past experience [...] In recognizing and relating to other people, we all depend heavily on our learned ability of closure" (63). This learned ability, however, likely operates differently in everyday life for people with different cognitive styles. When David declines to talk about whether he experienced abuse at Brook Farm, he frustrates this kind of automatic, normative closure for his neurotypical siblings. When Paul and Judy learn of David's possible abuse, but David's deferral frustrates the everyday closure of the written and spoken word, the family doesn't know quite how to assess whether abuse took place, how to talk to him about it, or how to feel about it. Paul has no "past experience" from which to make closure out of the events at Brook Farm except to draw from the family's own history of small-scale but troubling violence. For Paul, this means using the chair again as a visual referent for violence, while also making crucial changes in representation with the use of lines.

Paul returns to the image of a chair as a visible referent to try to imagine what David may have experienced at Brook Farm. As with the image of the chair during the family dinner scene, Paul focuses on it to represent a challenging situation or a "difficult articulation," while also making key modifications. Because David does not disclose any abuse, Paul cannot create closure regarding his time at Brook Farm, a gap in knowledge that affects his graphic representation. Whereas previously Paul had depended on jagged lines and scant, sensory-focused words to convey a violent scene within the family's history, when Paul tries to imagine the violence that David might have experienced at Brook Farm, he makes different choices in representation. In a large full-page panel, he imagines David sitting in a chair, turned slightly away, with the figure of Gorilla Watson looming ominously over him, saying, "David's the best roommate a fella could want" (162). Judy describes Gorilla Watson as "someone who had been a character on the *Superman* television show and whom David had transformed, over the years, into a general but potent threat lurking outside the family tent" (148). Both David and Gorilla Watson are pictured behind bars—the straight vertical and horizontal lines of the bars in this scene of impending violence, as well as the lines of Gorilla Watson's checkered suit, are in stark contrast to the other previous scenes of actual violence featuring jagged lines. Another key difference in this panel that separates it from Paul's previous scenes of violence is the use of words. In previous panels of violence, in which Paul was depicting scenes of physicality from the family's history, no words beyond onomatapoetic sounds were used to narrate the scene. In contrast, in this scene of impending and imagined violence, Paul uses Gorilla Watson's ominous threat along with an appropriating stance—standing over David, with his hands placed menacingly on his shoulders—to suggest what may have happened to David. The implication is that David is never out of the harmful clutches of his caregivers and is frequently subjected to violence. Images and words work together more closely in this panel than in other scenes of violence because Paul depends on an imagined closure in order to suggest to readers what David may have experienced.

This partnership between words and images, however, takes on non-normative properties. The chapter in which this panel of imagined violence appears also involves Paul revisiting the head-butting scene between him and David. In this retelling, Paul makes key changes. He again draws an image of David about to step on his comics and includes another panel of them butting heads, but the words in the text boxes accompanying these scenes reinterpret them for the audience. For example, while growing up, the Karasiks had previously understood David's autism as a condition that caused sensory input and other experiences to arrive as "splintered" for David, a property that Paul also attributes to the chair that breaks during the family dinner scene. Yet in this retelling, which includes panels that revisit the physicality between the brothers, Paul revises this assessment, writing that for David "it ain't splintered inside, it's splintered outside" (158). This change in perspective represents Paul beginning to change how he imagines David's cognitive state and starting to imagine David's point of view. Reimagining the splintered metaphor, he sees the inside of David's mind as "tidy and rich as Fort Knox" (158). He imagines the outside world as dangerous and untidy, "enough to make the coolest yegg crack," a reassessment that accompanies the redrawn panel of David and Paul butting heads (158). This head butt, rather than connoting violence, then, represents Paul shaking his neurotypical perspective loose and beginning to reimagine David's point of view.

This reassessment carries through to the panel featuring Gorilla Watson hunching over David behind bars. Paul finally seems able to accept that he cannot make a normative or neurotypical closure in this panel or, more broadly, regarding the details of David's potential abuse. Because David does not disclose any details about his possible abuse, Paul cannot represent it in a clear-cut, normative or neurotypical way. Instead, he must reimagine closure, using the chair as a visible referent from the family's history to suggest violence and drawing on the threatening figure of Gorilla Watson from David's world. The words accompanying this image, although they work together, do not encourage the clear-cut, normative closure that McCloud describes in comics. In contrast to the closure that McCloud describes—the images of a man with an axe chasing another man and the murder implied by the sound in the next panel—Paul's closure regarding David's potential abuse is more open-ended, unclear, and haunting. When Gorilla Watson says that David's "the best roommate a fella could want," the audience, as well as Paul, does not know quite what to imagine. The implication is that David is at the mercy of his abusive caregivers, but because David defers the question about his abuse, uncertainty predominates. This uncertainty is haunting and each reader has to decide whether or how to imagine what David might have experienced.

Non-neurotypical closure?

Autism is commonly understood as a difficulty in imagining another person's mental state, but Paul's experience reverses this expectation and focuses instead on the difficulties a neurotypical faces imagining an autistic perspective. When David frustrates the type of neurotypical closure that Paul wants when he learns of the abuse at Brook Farm, Paul has to adjust his perspective. He has to reimagine David's point of view and attempt to convey a different type of closure. He starts this reimagination of closure in the panel featuring Gorilla Watson and David behind bars and follows through on this reimagination in the last panel of the memoir, suggesting possibilities beyond neurotypical closure.

The final chapter of the memoir combines Judy's traditional narrative memoir with Paul's graphic approach. In Paul's part of the chapter, which concludes the memoir, he depicts himself showing David a draft of the memoir that he and Judy have been working on, taking special attention to point out the scenes in which he and David were fighting (196). Paul asks David if he wants to make any concluding remarks, to which David responds, "That's enough of that" (199). In this memoir within a memoir moment, Paul and Judy seem to be self-conscious of the fact that they have been representing David throughout the narrative and would like David to contribute to his representation, even at this late stage. David seems not interested, walking away from Paul as he starts rehearsing a *Superman* show, a habit of his that takes place everyday at 4:30. In the final page of the memoir, Paul depicts himself peering out of the border of a small panel to watch David, depicted as a much larger figure, striding forward confidently, with a smile on his face, reciting a *Superman* script that occupies three text-heavy word balloons. Paul's head and hand break out of the small panel he occupies as he looks out of his panel to view David, who is not hemmed in by the borders of a panel and instead occupies most of the space of the page. One potential closure between these two images is that Paul is potentially breaking free of the frame in which he views his brother and reevaluating him.

A related but more radical closure, however, takes David's performance of *Superman* as his contribution to the end of the memoir and values that non-normative contribution. David's repetition of a *Superman* script does not seem at first to produce the kind of closure expected from the panels featuring Paul's request for David to contribute to the memoir. But if closure is unmoored from its normative and neurotypical underpinnings, which assume that everyone's perception between part and whole operates the same way, then other possibilities exist. From this non-normative perspective, David's contribution to the memoir *is* his *Superman* performance—a contribution that may not fit into neurotypical expectations regarding closure, but a closure that invites readers to imagine closure differently. This reimagination means that David's part—his *Superman* performance—is integral to the whole of the memoir, regardless of whether it makes "sense" or contributes to a "unified reality" according to neurotypical expectations. Paul's reevaluation of David's perspective also allows Paul to reconsider David's deferral of the question regarding whether he was abused, suggesting that David's non-disclosure is not simply a frustration of closure, but instead an opportunity to reimagine it. Rather than focusing on what David won't tell him, Paul finally emphasizes the contribution that David is making in this final panel, a change in perspective that moves critical features in comics such as closure, word, and image forward into the potential of neurodiversity rather than backward into normativity.

Works cited

B., David. *Epileptic*. New York: Pantheon, 2005.

Birge, Sarah. "No Life Lessons Here: Comics, Autism and Empathetic Scholarship." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30.1 (2010). Web.

Couser, G. Thomas. *Signifying Bodies: Disability in Contemporary Life Writing*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009.

Jacobs, Dale, and Jay Dolmage. "Difficult Articulations: Comics Autobiography, Trauma, and Disability." In *The Future of Text and Image: Collected Essays on Literary and Visual Conjunctures*. Ed. Ofra Amihay and Lauren Walsh. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012. 69–93.

Karasik, Paul and Judy. *The Ride Together: A Brother and Sister's Memoir of Autism in the Family*. New York: Washington Square, 2003.

Leavitt, Sarah. *Tangles: A Story about Alzheimer's, My Mother, and Me*. New York: Skyhorse, 2012.

Linton, Simi. *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*. New York University Press, 1998.

McCloud. Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1993.

Montague-Reyes, Karen. *Circling Normal: A Book about Autism*. Kansas City: Universal Press Syndicate, 2007.

National Crime Victimization Survey. Web. www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/capd08.pdf.

Pekar, Harvey, and Joyce Brabner. *Our Cancer Year*. New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1994.

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford University Press, 1985.

Squier, Susan. "So Long as They Grow Out of It: Comics, the Discourse of Developmental Normalcy, and Disability." *Journal of Medical Humanities* 29 (2008): 71–88.

8

“Why Couldn’t You Let Me Die?”: Cyborg, Social Death, and Narratives of Black Disability

Jonathan W. Gray

> In the posthuman there are no essential differences [...] between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals.
>
> —N. Katherine Hayles,
> *How We Became Posthuman*

In 1980 writer Marv Wolfman and illustrator George Pérez launched the *New Teen Titans* for DC Comics. DC sought to tap into the soaring popularity of Marvel’s *Uncanny X-Men* with their own team of late-adolescent outcasts, and succeeded with *New Teen Titans* emerging as one of DC’s top-selling books for most of the 1980s. Wolfman and Pérez created several new characters for the series: the alien warrior princess Starfire, the mystical and tragic Raven, and Victor Stone (also known as Cyborg). As the only African American hero in the group, and in fact one of the few leading Black characters in mainstream superhero comics, Stone is an exceptional figure in a genre replete with wonders. Cyborg’s origin establishes his difference: he is the only member of the Teen Titans who is neither the protégé of a more established hero nor associated with a royal family whose heredity grants unique abilities.[1] Further, Stone is the only hero in the group who is disabled. Indeed, Cyborg’s status as superhero literally derives from the process of rehabilitation: he must successfully complete physical and occupational therapy in order to (re)master the gross and fine motor skills needed to use the metal limbs and techno-organs grafted into his body after a catastrophic accident nearly kills him. Without the imbrication of the technology that eventually turns him into a cyborg hero, Stone would remain a paraplegic quadruple amputee. His heroism, then, is marked by the *techne* that allows him to overcome his disability and his willingness to use his cyber-abilities altruistically. From this point of view, Stone is a "supercrip" par excellence.

And yet, the fullest reading of Stone demands that we interrogate his status as a triple minority—not simply disabled but also Black and post-human. While theorists like Donna Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles celebrate the cyborg for its transgressive and liberatory potential, popular culture has often looked askance at the mixing of technology and humanity.[2] LeiLani Nishime suggests that this disapproval derives at least in part from "the cyborg [being] read as a powerful metaphor for the historical bogeyman of contamination—racial mixing" (34), but Stone's presence on a team of superheroes designed to evoke the plurality of post-civil rights America works against this view.[3] Still, even if Wolfman and Pérez constructed the Teen Titans to reflect the now fashionable diversity of the United States, Stone's origins reveal an anxiety about the ways that minority communities deploy oppositional rhetorics to think through the politicized ramifications of their difference. Wolfman and Pérez portray Stone as a decidedly depoliticized character who nonetheless negotiates competing discourses of grievance and respectability yet seems unable to do the same once he becomes disabled. Stone's lack of politics produces a minority hero whose sterile otherness is palatable to a popular comic audience.

While there is much to celebrate about Stone's inclusion in a bestselling text in a genre not noted for its sense of democratic inclusion (heroes of color and heroes with disabilities, to say nothing of a hero of color with a disability, remain almost as rare in superhero comics today as they did in 1980), Wolfman and Pérez exploit Stone's overdetermined, triply othered presence to distinguish their new team from earlier versions of the Teen Titans. It's telling that each of the holdovers from the original 1964 iteration of the Teen Titans—Robin, Kid Flash, and Wonder Girl—are able-bodied white understudies of iconic heroes, while new members Changeling (green skin), Starfire (she, like the rest of her alien race, possesses a tawny orange skin), and Cyborg are all marked as visually different.[4] Pérez designed each of the new additions to the team (and this includes the markedly

Semitic features of the mysterious Raven) to evoke diversity, and they are far more visually distinctive than their more venerable teammates. This seems a mundane observation to make about a superhero comic, but as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson reminds us in *Staring*, inviting an audience to look while simultaneously defying that audience's expectation about what they will see demands the creation of a narrative capable of providing coherence to the visual tableau, and comics as a medium depends in part upon this tension.[5] Cyborg's visual distinctiveness helps establish this iteration of the Teen Titans as truly new and signals that its creators intend to tell a more progressive kind of superhero story.

Victor's origin defies the easy stereotypes surrounding race in the early 1980s, even as the text employs more conventional tropes about the disabled subject.[6] His parents, Silas and Elinore Stone, are Ph.D.s who work in a laboratory in New York City, and some of Stone's earliest memories are playing in the lab while his parents pursued their research. Simultaneously career-minded and doting caregivers, his parents homeschool him throughout his primary school years, incorporating experimental learning techniques in a successful effort to increase his intelligence while ostensibly protecting him from the "tangle of pathologies" that afflict less accomplished Black families.[7] In time Stone grows to resent his isolation from his peers and his parents' almost clinical treatment of him, and insists upon a more typical life-path. He rebels against his cerebral parents, initially by running the streets with Ron Evers, a jive-talking juvenile delinquent, and later by enrolling in public school and embracing athletics as a way to distinguish himself. Thus, despite his 170 IQ, Stone rejects what he perceives as the austere detachment of science to adopt an embodied urban masculinity signified by his athletic prowess.

Victor's conflict with his parents encapsulates the anxieties of a generation of Black professionals hoping to raise children capable of seizing the opportunities offered by post-civil rights America while shielding their progeny from both the structural racism and the mores of a persistent underclass that threatened to circumscribe these chances. The streetwise Evers personifies this dual threat. It is the teenaged Evers who exposes a young Victor to Harlem street culture, looking after the precocious eight-year-old when he steals away from his house after feigning sleep to wander the neighborhood. As the friends age, Evers becomes increasingly radicalized, expressing himself in language weighted with racial resentment. When Stone, now a sophomore in high school, happens upon Evers while on a date with his girlfriend Marcy, Evers attempts to recruit him for a "rumble with a white gang" later that evening. When Stone hesitates, Marcy encourages him to support Evers, noting that "the color of our skin marks us Vic ... maybe we should start doin' something about it" (Wolfman, Pérez, and Breeding 10). Influenced by his working-class peers' articulation of the importance of racial solidarity, Stone joins the fight and is slashed in the fracas. After a bloodied and bruised Victor makes his way home, his apoplectic parents lecture him about squandering the opportunities they have worked so hard to procure for him.

Pérez's depictions of Silas Stone and Ron Evers deepen the melodramatic tension between the warring ideals each represents. Silas bears an uncanny resemblance to Sidney Poitier, while Evers (who shares a last name with the martyred Mississippi civil rights leader Medgar Evers) looks like civil rights firebrand H. Rap Brown circa 1968. Victor's dilemma, then, lies in choosing between the assimilationist rhetoric offered by his father or the language of urban grievance expressed by Evers. When, two years after the rumble, Ron invites Victor to participate in a protest he is planning at the Statue of Liberty, Victor refuses, damaging his oldest friendship because he feels Ron is "letting ... hate" consume him (12). When Evers complains that Stone is unable to relate to his struggle thanks to his privileged upbringing, Victor replies that he "worked damn hard" toward an athletic scholarship because his father "wouldn't give [him] a penny unless I majored in science. But I proved myself. I worked and got what I wanted" (13). Victor seems to have found a compromise between his father's ideals and Ron's, yet he doesn't seem to grasp how Ron's prospects might be limited by the structural inequalities that proscribe the opportunities for the many children in Harlem whose parents lack doctorates. It is telling that when Victor relates his decision to spurn Ron to his fellow teenaged superheroes, one of them congratulates him for rejecting Ron's "violence," when Ron merely sought help articulating his demands for redress from the state (13).

It is at this moment—when Victor seems to have eluded the DuBoisian and Garveyite narratives represented by Silas Stone and Ron Evers by embracing a post-soul perspective—that disaster strikes.[8] Victor, newly enrolled in a local college on a track scholarship, stops by his parents' lab after class. While he visits with them, one of their experiments goes awry, killing his mother and destroying more than 70 percent of his body. Silas Stone works diligently to rescue his son, infusing him with the technology that will save his life. When Victor regains consciousness days after the procedure, he is traumatized by the process that has rendered him as much machine as man (see Figure 3) and exclaims, "Why couldn't you let me die?!" (16). Forced to rehabilitate under the watchful eye of the father he's resented for years, Stone lashes out. He blames Silas for his

Figure 3 Victor is traumatized upon awakening to discover his transformation into Cyborg (Wolfman et al., "Cyborg" 16)

disability and his mother's demise, and his father's selfless ministrations toward his son do little to mollify him.

After completing rehab, Victor finds his relationship to the world changed by his disability. People visibly recoil from his countenance as he walks the streets, and his college coach withdraws his scholarship because the futuristic machinery that keeps him alive also grants him a competitive advantage over "normal" athletes (21). Perhaps worst of all, Marcy no longer returns his calls. Completely unmanned, Victor laments, "Marcy wasn't goin' to be available again. Not for a freak who looked like me" (21). This utterance demonstrates the degree to which Victor uncritically accepts society's definition of disability as a form of social death—he negotiates his racial identity more assuredly, rejecting the assertions of parents and peers alike and seemingly unbothered by the way his chosen vocation (track and field) plays into stereotypes of African American physicality. Because he has "transcended" race in this way, Victor seems to lack the critical consciousness needed to resist the dominant conception of disability as an affliction that renders one pathetic. Stone's transformation, and his easy acceptance of the stereotypes that mark disability as a fate worse than death, effectively sunders his connection to the athletic Black masculine identity he fought to achieve, preventing him from pursuing the activities that allowed him to distinguish himself from both Ron and his father.[9] Additionally, Victor's necessary reengagement with his father's scholarship in order to learn how to properly maintain his new body aligns him closer to his father's praxis, further undermining his sense of independence.[10]

It is at this point, when Victor's sense of self is at its most attenuated, that Ron reenters his life. Ron's demonstration on Liberty Island resulted in his incarceration, and he has apparently been further radicalized while in prison, graduating from peaceful protest to terrorism. Ron shares with Victor a scheme to call attention to Black American suffering by blowing up the United Nations during the general assembly, hoping Victor will use his post-human abilities to enable him to bring this plan to fruition. While Victor initially refuses to assist Ron, he later agrees, but only so he might stop him from destroying the iconic New York landmark and taking innocent lives. However, when Victor shows up 30 minutes before he is scheduled to meet Ron in Turtle Bay, he learns that Ron and his crew are not misguided freedom fighters but mercenaries working for an unnamed organization intent on destabilizing global diplomacy. The plan Ron shared with Victor was a ruse to lure him to the scene, where his post-human and Black body would mark him as the one solely responsible for the UN's destruction. Victor uses his newfound abilities to defeat Ron and his gang, but (while struggling to prevent Stone from disabling the bomb) Ron falls into the East River, seemingly to his death.

This episode represents Stone's first act of selfless heroism, and sets him on the path that leads to his membership in the Teen Titans. He, then, gains access to his new heroic identity literally at the expense of his less fortunate compatriot. While Ron saved Victor's life in a more innocent time ("couldn't let a brother go splat, could I?") and served to connect him to a working-class Black community that granted Victor the space to forge his own sense of self, Stone correctly chooses to protect a symbol of global cosmopolitanism instead of preserving his relationship with his "brother" Ron. Ron, of course, has betrayed not only Victor but also the ideals for which he once stood. This is emblematized by Ron's willingness to destroy the UN at another's behest, the site where Malcolm X once hoped to persuade the Commission on Human Rights to censure the United States government for abrogating African Americans' civil rights. While Ron's Black Nationalism leads him first to incarceration and then to a cynical duplicity, Cyborg's decision to oppose Ron reconnects Stone with the embrace of hard work and fair play that only weeks earlier formed the basis for his self-conception as an athlete. This allows him to preserve the cosmopolitan community even after he has been transformed into a figure who seemingly lacks a place in that society due to his disability. While Ron's nationalism has given way to a cynical pessimism, Victor retains some belief in the possibility that things might improve, for others, if not for himself.

Stone is recruited into the new Teen Titans shortly after these events, stumbling into another community that celebrates embodied action on behalf of pluralistic values over theorizing (Silas) or the pursuit of politicized self-interest (Ron). Yet, even when he begins to exploit the abilities he's gained from his post-human body to preserve the social order, Stone has trouble reconciling his self-image with his altruistic heroism. Just as he cannot embrace the Black nationalist critique of a society that has allowed his family to flourish (his parents hold doctorates, after all, and Vic himself earned a try-out for the US

Olympic Track and Field team prior to his impairment), he fails to understand he might connect his disability to a larger community that was then seeking societal recognition and political redress. Stone seems to have no use for "the assortment of 'Pride movements'—Black, gay, disability—[which practice] all forms of a politics of proprioception; a contemporary politics of bodies in which aesthetic, as well as political and economic, tyrannies are demolished by excluded groups" (Patterson and Hughes 600). Because his cybernetic form no longer fits his conception of how a body should work, he accepts the idea that he is "a freak" rather than challenging the notions of the suitably normal body that generate these feelings of self-loathing. Throughout Wolfman and Pérez's celebrated tenure on the book, a brooding Victor struggles constantly for a way to resolve the disconnect between his celebrated status as a superhero and his abject self-conception.[11] To put this more succinctly, Stone feels like a misfit.

As Garland-Thomson explains, fit "suggests a generally positive way of being and positioning based on an absence of conflict and a state of correct synchronization with one's circumstances"; people who conceive of themselves as misfits experience a "discrepancy between body and world, between that which is expected and that which is" ("Misfits" 593). This feeling of discrepancy describes Stone's attitude toward his new state of embodiment, even as he achieves a kind of notoriety far beyond anything he might have expected as an athlete. Garland-Thomson notes that

> the experience of misfitting can produce subjugated knowledges from which an oppositional consciousness and politicized identity might arise [...] It can also foster intense awareness of social injustice and the formation of a community of misfits that can collaborate to achieve a more liberatory politics and praxis. Indeed, much of the disability rights movement grew from solidarity born of misfitting. (593)

Of course the fiercely individualistic and apolitical Stone has difficulty conceiving of himself as a member of an aggrieved community. Still, it is telling that Stone's closest friend on the Teen Titans is Garfield Logan (also known as Changeling), a youth who lost his parents in an accident and gained green skin when he acquired his powers. Throughout Wolfman and Pérez's run, Logan is portrayed as the least successful member of the group, unlucky in love and the least powerful (which is to say, least useful) member of the team. Victor aligns himself with Logan in part due to his recognition of Logan's discomfort with his place on the team despite his sizable trust fund and self-deprecating wit. They are both misfits.

Victor only really begins to accept his cyborg body when he locates himself in the disabled community, which happens almost entirely by accident. Fully integrated into the Teen Titans and emboldened by their success (the group has by this point driven off an alien incursion, battled the Justice League, and repelled a demonic invasion), Stone attempts to reconnect with Marcy. Despite his good deeds and notoriety, Marcy wants nothing to do with him, reminding him that, due to his off-putting disability, "things [can't] be the same again" (Wolfman and Pérez 12). Stone lacks the critical vocabulary he needs to rebut her ableist bigotry and retreats, brooding over Marcy's rejection as he walks through Central Park. While in the park, he happens upon a group of children playing baseball. The ball gets past one of the kids and rolls to Victor's feet. When Stone attempts to return the ball, the child exclaims in surprise after noticing Stone's cybernetic hand. While Victor braces for another rejection, the child simply comments that Victor's hand is much nicer than his own. Stone is befuddled until the child removes his baseball glove to reveal that, like Victor, he is missing a limb and uses a prosthetic in its place. When Stone realizes that all of the children playing baseball are disabled and attend the West Side School for the Handicapped, he seems beside himself with delight. As with Ron in Harlem, Victor seems to intuit at once that he has again stumbled upon a community that will afford him the space necessary to come to terms with his evolving identity. When the student he first encountered eagerly claims him as one of the group ("he's just like us"), Stone can scarcely believe his good fortune.

Of course, Victor's interest in the community of disabled students is heightened by his attraction to their teacher Sarah Simms. Simms serves as Victor's Anne Sullivan, educating him about the existence of the disabled community, of which he is a reluctant member. Indeed, she describes her responsibilities as "show[ing her students] that they can lead a full life again" (16), instruction Victor sorely needs. When the kids invite him to play baseball with them, he jumps at the chance, finding pleasure in the opportunity to once again engage in a pleasurable and meaningful athletic behavior he thought denied him. Shortly after their flirtatious initial encounter, Stone begins dating Simms and volunteering at her school, occasionally bringing his teammates by to impress and inspire his charges. This activity grounds Victor, allowing him to reestablish his sense of self among a nurturing group that understands negotiating impairment. Indeed, the two become so close that Simms's life is regularly imperiled due to her devotion to her cyborg paramour.

The contrast between the accepting, platinum blonde Sarah and the intolerant, disapproving Harlemite Marcy could not be clearer. The distance between their perspectives seems symbolized in part by their locations on the island of Manhattan. While Marcy is associated with Harlem, the very location of Sarah's school (on a tony block in the 70s between Broadway and Amsterdam, just north of Lincoln Center) suggests the accepting Upper West Side liberalism she clearly represents.[12] Indeed, the text identifies Sarah with her school so completely that, throughout her relationship with Victor, she is always depicted as leaving her place of work when meeting him for a date. Her entire life seems given over to interacting with people with disabilities. Sarah is able to accept Victor's multiple differences and post-humanity, and establish a romantic relationship with him because her occupation grants her unique insight into the humanity of the disabled. Marcy, despite her politicized racial consciousness, can only see Victor as a freak despite their years of intimacy. Further, while Marcy encouraged Stone to put his body on the line to defend the Black community from foreign incursions when he was an Olympic-level athlete, she cannot appreciate the risks he takes to safeguard all of humanity as a disabled cyborg hero.

Wolfman and Pérez's presentation of the relationship between disability and race through Victor's interactions with Ron, Marcy, and Sarah is quite problematic. Victor's behavior reinforces the notion that a tragic accident that leaves one disabled also necessarily destroys one's sense of self, while Ron's predicament implies racial abjection results primarily from a parochial understanding of race and not through structural realities that continually circumscribe the ways one can live. Thus it is the tolerant Sarah, not the militant Marcy, who teaches Stone to be proud of his unique identity because she has access to a more catholic and liberal perspective. That Victor, a young Black man who would have come of age in Harlem during the 'Black is beautiful' period in the 1970s, and who worked so assiduously to establish his independence from his parents, would need to be instructed on embracing a liberatory self-identity by his white girlfriend is only credible if one accepts that race pride is necessarily corrosive and limiting and that disability should be understood as an affliction and not a condition that one can adjust to. Ironically, while his privileged upbringing prevents him from adopting a politicized perspective toward race, it also left him unable to understand that while disability might "misfit" him, this state of affairs results more from society's failure to accommodate a broader range of bodies than from any intrinsic lack of value on his part.

While in *Extraordinary Bodies* Garland-Thomson correctly calls for conceptions of disability that shift it away "from the realm of medicine into that of political minorities, [that] recast it from a form of pathology to a form of ethnicity" (6), we must also take care not to facilely make the kind of easy substitutions between disability and race that Wolfman and Pérez engage in here. Indeed, as Malini Johar Schueller notes, this kind of "[a]dditive analysis [...] incorporate[s] particularities and differences as additions to a common universalist narrative" (65)—in this case, the benevolence of upper-middle-class liberal values that often fail to question social arrangements in the absence of visual protest. Of course, it may seem silly to expect such careful differentiation from a mainstream 1980s superhero comic, but this comic managed to present the tension between middle-class and working-class African Americans through Silas Stone and Ron Evers with originality and nuance. Perhaps one way to begin to understand the difference between the text's treatment of race and disability is to recall that *New Teen Titans* debuted 15 years after the passage of the Civil and Voting Rights Acts but nearly a decade before the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. As disabled activist and former Jerry's Kid Laura Hershey notes, during the 1970s and 1980s the cultural norm was to portray people with disabilities as helpless and pathetic, trapped inside their flawed bodies. While the superhuman Victor is certainly far from helpless, he remains unable to see his disability as something to be managed, only as a problem to be corrected.

I want to contrast the Hayles quotation with which I opened the essay with Victor's abjection in the face of his disabled body. It seems for this particular cyborg essential differences persist and the primary goal remains regaining an able-bodied and fleshly state of grace rather than achieving a kind of techno-organic apotheosis. Some of this is due to the way superhero comics engage in what I call narrative stasis: certain central elements of a character must remain unresolved in order for that character to remain in the perpetually timeless state required for superhero comics' unique brand of serial publication. Narrative stasis is why Clark Kent cannot reveal his identity to Lois Lane or ever gather enough evidence to finally jail Lex Luthor, why Spider-Man remains an object of hostility to a disapproving public, why Bruce Wayne's girlfriends are almost always doomed to die at the hands of one of Gotham's many mentally unstable villains. While this tension may give other superheroes the "timeless" appeal needed to connect with new audiences, it is problematic in a hero with both disability and race at the center of his origin. In order for Stone's characterization (and that of the Hulk and the X-Men's Beast and other heroes whose power is represented as some sort of disabling burden) to be consistent with narrative stasis, he can never accept his disabled form. In this way, comics violate David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder's fourth idea of narrative prosthesis, "the cure" (54). In superhero comics, certain resolutions must be continually put off—there can be no cure, no proper resolution of an established narrative tension. While some of these deferrals seem plausible (based on what we know about the persistence of racism, it seems likely mutants might remain despised by a significant portion of human society across decades), Stone's attitude toward his body, established in the early 1980s, is not permitted to change in order to better coincide with more current understandings of disability.[13]

The most recent reconfiguration of Victor Stone in the fictive space known as DC's multiverse demonstrates the persistence of his tragic and pathologized view of disability. Cyborg has proven such a popular character that when DC rebooted their continuity in 2013 he was promoted from the Teen Titans to the Justice League. With his new "retconned" status as a founding member of the Justice League—the most iconic group in the DC universe, in part because its membership includes Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman—Stone has become an even more central figure in superhero comics, the highest profile character of color at DC and one of the most visible Black and disabled characters in all of comics.[14] His updated origin shifts his sport of choice from track to football, recasts his father's research in a more sinister light, changes the nature of Victor's relationship with his mother, and reveals that some of the tech in his body is in fact extraterrestrial. Despite all of these changes, Stone remains an abject character who mourns the loss of his humanity. Indeed, in *Justice League* #1 he again laments his newly disabled condition by insisting that his father should have let him die rather than condemn him to a life coping with disability. It seems, at least for Victor Stone, that a life with prosthetic limbs will continue to be a fate worse than death.

Notes

1. Robin, Changeling, and Kid-Flash are protégés of Batman, Rita Garr of the Doom Patrol, and the Flash, respectively. Starfire and Raven both inherit their powers because of their dynastic heritage. Donna Troy (also known as Wonder Girl) is both Wonder Woman's protégée and an Amazon princess like her mentor. Cyborg is an athletic teen from Harlem.
2. Interestingly, Wolfman and Pérez anticipate James Cameron's *Terminator* not only through Stone but also through an assassin named Deathstroke the Terminator in *New Teen Titans #2*. The Terminator, as he is known until the film's outsized success forced the comic to emphasize the first part of his alias, is a supercrip assassin (he's missing an eye but is superhuman in every other way) who serves as the team's primary foil.
3. Under Wolfman and Pérez, the Teen Titans were one of the few superhero teams boasting something approaching gender equality, with three women among its seven members.
4. Lennard Davis offers a sustained discussion of how "normalcy" is constructed to create the "problem" of the disabled person.
5. Both Scott McCloud and Will Eisner construct theories of comics that fail to sufficiently account for the role stereotyping and other expectations have on what an image is understood to communicate.
6. This analysis draws Cyborg's origin as depicted in *New Teen Titans* #7, "Assault on Titans Tower"; *New Teen Titans* #8, "A Day in the Lives"; and *Tales of the New Teen Titans* #1, "Cyborg."
7. This chronology is important. If Stone is 17 or 18 in 1980 when *New Teens Titans* debuts, then he would have been a toddler when *The Moynihan Report* was published in 1965. Similarly, the most popular representations of Black parenthood at the time were probably the television shows *Good Times* and *The Jeffersons*. Silas Stone is a very different father than either James Evans or George Jefferson.
8. Mark Anthony Neal uses the term post-soul aesthetic to describe the uneasy negotiations between mainstream and Black culture experienced by the generation that came of age in the 1970s and 1980s. He seems to describe Victor's initial evolution perfectly.
9. Disability studies highlights the ways that the performance of identity must be understood as an embodied exercise and not simply (linguistically)

performative. See Rose Galvin for an overview on how the experience of impairment transforms the newly disabled person's self-perception. Victor's transformation into an abject cyborg challenges narratives of "racial uplift [which] held that rights and freedom would accrue to African Americans who achieved economic self-sufficiency, manhood, and respectability" (Knadler 101).

10. Stone reconciles with his father only after he learns Silas has terminal cancer. Facing the loss of his father, Stone puts aside his anger to try to establish a normal relationship with him. So, while one disabling, medicalized trauma caused the final rift between Victor and Silas Stone, another allows both men to move past their differences.
11. Wolfman and Pérez collaborated on the first 55 issues. The first eight issues of this series have recently been collected and re-released as *New Teen Titans, Vol. 1*. I cite from the individual issues, which are impossible for all but the most dedicated collector to find, but those interested in the primary sources should look to this volume.
12. While gentrification has transformed the island of Manhattan into a sanitized playground for the global elite, in the early 1980s most blocks north of 86th Street on the West side of Central Park were working class and crime ridden, and going to Harlem was likened in the tabloid press to risking one's life.
13. We now live in a world where "blade runners" like Aimee Mullins and Oscar Pistorius have not only achieved celebrity but are also regarded as sex symbols. Mullins was a muse for the late fashion designer Alexander McQueen, while Pistorius was a global brand ambassador for Nike and graced the cover of fashion magazines like *GQ* before his fall from grace.
14. Retcon is short for "retroactive continuity," the metatextual act of periodically updating the circumstances surrounding its iconic characters to keep them relevant in a changing marketplace. Of course, these market pressures also allow for the creation of the kind of fantastical narratives at which superhero comics excel. Andrew Friedenthal's dissertation, "Heroes of the Past, Readers of the Present, Stories of the Future," offers a comprehensive account of how retcon functions in superhero texts. For a more concise overview, see Friedenthal's "Monitoring the Past."

Works cited

Davis, Lennard J. "Introduction." In *The Disability Studies Reader*. Ed. Lennard J. Davis. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Eisner, Will. *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist*. New York: Norton, 2008.

Friedenthal, Andrew J. "Monitoring the Past: DC Comics' Crisis on Infinite Earths and the Narrativization of Comic Book History." *ImageTexT: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies* 6.2 (2011): n.p.

——— "Heroes of the Past, Readers of the Present, Stories of the Future: Continuity, Cultural Memory, and Historical Revisionism in Superhero Comics." Diss. University of Texas-Austin, 2014.

Galvin, Rose D. "Researching the Disabled Identity: Contextualising the Identity Transformations which Accompany the Onset of Impairment." *Sociology of Health & Illness* 27.3 (2005): 393–413.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

——— *Staring: How We Look*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

——— "Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept." *Hypatia* 26.3 (2011): 591–609.

Haraway, Donna J. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Hershey, Laura. "From Poster Child to Protester." *Crip Commentary* (1993). Web.

Knadler, Stephen. "Dis-abled Citizenship: Narrating the Extraordinary Body in Racial Uplift." *Arizona Quarterly* 69.3 (2013): 99–128.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*. New York: Morrow, 1993.

Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder, eds. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000.

Neal, Mark Anthony. *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

Nishime, LeiLani. "The Mulatto Cyborg: Imagining a Multiracial Future." *Cinema Journal* 44.2 (2005): 34–49.

Patterson, Kevin, and Bill Hughes. "Disability Studies and Phenomenology: The Carnal Politics of Everyday Life." *Disability and Society* 14.5 (1999): 597–610.

Schueller, Malini Johar. "Analogy and (White) Feminist Theory: Thinking Race and the Color of the Cyborg Body." *Signs* 31.1 (2014): 63–92.

Wolfman, Marv (writer) and George Pérez (pencils and inks). "A Day in the Lives." *The New Teen Titans* #8 (June 1981), DC Comics.

Wolfman, Marv (writer), George Pérez (pencils), and Brett Breeding (inks). "Cyborg." *Tales of the New Teen Titans* #1 (June 1982), DC Comics.

9

"You Only Need Three Senses for This": The Disruptive Potentiality of Cyborg Helen Keller

Laurie Ann Carlson

Annie Sullivan. Feral Child. Water-pump. W-A-T-E-R. These are the images associated with Helen Keller, part of the pictorial mythology surrounding a beloved historical figure whose image has been co-opted to deliver a sentimental tale about perseverance over adversity. The pictorial mythology keeps Keller frozen in adolescence, ignores the radical pursuits of her adult life, and renders her into an asexual and a passive participant in her own narrative. Of course, the impulse to depict people with disabilities as passive and asexual is not new. As Mitchell S. Tepper explains, "Neglect of the pleasurable aspect in the discourse of sexuality and disability is perpetuated by the assumption that people with disabilities are child-like and asexual" (287). Women with disabilities are particularly susceptible to an erasure of sexuality, because "Sex is portrayed as a privilege of the white, heterosexual, young, single and non-disabled" (285). As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson observes, "women are the proper object of the male gaze, while disabled people are the proper object of the stare" ("Reshaping" 9). The "gaze" objectifies, while the "stare" dehumanizes ("Reshaping" 9), and representation of disabled women not only shapes how we are viewed by society, but how women with disabilities see ourselves, and the consequences go way beyond just perception.

Cyborg. Assassin. Secret Agent. Not images we would generally associate with Keller. Playing on the linguistic slippage between Killer and Keller (the cover of each issue has a red "I" juxtaposed on top of the "E" in Keller), Andrew Kreisberg and Matthew Rice's 2007–8 series *Helen Killer* focuses on a college-aged Keller who is altered by a device called the Omnicle and given the power of "soul sight." The supernatural ability of "soul sight" allows her to see evil, and she uses these abilities to protect President McKinley and the United States against anarchist assassins, supervillain scientists, and other ne'er-do-wells. In this chapter, I focus on *Helen Killer* as a visual and narrative departure from the myth of Helen Keller. The overlapping genres of superhero comics and science fiction within the medium of graphic literature, as well as a new imagining of the figure of the cyborg, grant means of looking at bodies and identities in terms of social constructions and material realities at once. Interrogating the material alongside the social is important because the ability to get past the lived reality of the body is a myth both created and exacerbated by the neoliberal fiction of autonomy associated with the American Dream. The fiction of the American Dream creates the false dichotomy of independence versus dependence, but cyborg Helen Keller is an interdependent being, and the series' conclusion focuses on her recognizing her interdependence. Kreisberg and Rice present a sexualized version of Helen Keller; she finally gets to be an adult woman who controls her own narrative. She becomes reconfigured with supernatural powers that bear no reference to reality, thus creating a rupture in realism that allows for a reexamination of cyborg Helen Keller through the lens of disability studies. The lens of disability studies proves that at the culmination of the series, Keller is a cyborg because disability forces her to conscientiously consider her interdependence. Likewise, destigmatizing interdependency challenges the "bootstrap" myth of neoliberal autonomy that works to oppress all bodies.

The oppression of bodies directly links with the way perceptions of bodies create identities, and these identities shape lived realities. Thus, if a woman is perceived to be passive, child-like, asexual, and "special needs," then society treats her as such. Representation not only structures, but also creates, realities; it is both informed by and responsible for the creation of the kinds of binaries that systems of oppression require. Photographs are often falsely thought to be faithful reproductions of their subject, but not only has that never been true, the age of Photoshopping makes this claim particularly false. They mislead because "[p]hotographs seem to be transparent windows onto reality that ensnare truth. But like all representations, photographs organize our perceptions, shaping the objects as they depict them by using conventions of presentation that invoke cultural ideas and expectations" (Garland-Thomson, "Politics" 57–8). Films are also not faithful replicas of reality, and Arthur Penn's 1962 *The Miracle Worker* (still the version of Keller's story widely accepted as definitive) acts as an unfortunate but instructive example of representation's failures. The many children's picture books about her life are also sentimental tales of an innocent Keller overcoming adversity with the help of her Teacher, Annie Sullivan. They too render Keller an inactive participant in the tale of Sullivan's mythical and miracle-creating teaching skills. The life of Keller and our collective cultural memory of her seem to be narratives about two different women, both before and after her death. As Kim Nielsen explains, there is no accident in the discrepancy between Keller's life works and our collective cultural memory of her. Rather, a great deal of effort was put into shaping the public image of Keller (125). Yet, these myths are filed under the genre of realism.

Genre is, in itself, a loaded term. Graphic literature contains pulpy genres like superhero comics and science fiction, both of which fall under the rubric of speculative fiction. Guardians of the canon discredit speculative fiction because of its distance from the realist mode. Yet in this distance lie infinite possibilities for looking at bodies differently. As Ursula Le Guin points out, "The definition of a genre is often an act of offense, or of retaliation" (21). Critics and academics dismissively label science fiction as mere "'*genre fiction*,' that is, not *literature,* in order to restrict *literature* to the privileged mode, realism" (Le Guin 20). Science fiction defies normative structures and content, precisely because it is not realism. The same fluidity and self-reflexivity that makes science fiction hard to define allows for it to represent bodies differently. A liberating genre like science fiction and an outlaw form like comics make an ideal place for a reimagining of Helen Keller. As such, *Helen Killer* recovers some of the radicalness of Keller's life. *Helen Killer* employs this power to look at bodies—and Keller's body in particular—differently. Science fiction often contains rich social commentaries; however, any fan of science fiction knows that characters with disabilities often end up being cured by some scientific or fantastical intervention. *Avatar*'s Jake Sully (2009), *Lost*'s John Locke (2004–10), and the *Fringe*'s Nina Sharp (2008–13) are recent instances of this tendency. Science fiction and comic books often focus both on heroic characters who overcome their disabilities and on villainous characters who have marked (also often disabled) bodies that signify their marked souls.

Science fiction also contains the often contested but still philosophically useful figure of the cyborg. Cyborgs are wired for interdependency. They are also a means of negotiating between the material and sociocultural in relation to identities. Donna Haraway first describes the female cyborg as "cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as fiction" and "our way out of the types of dualisms that have haunted feminists for centuries" (150). By definition cyborgs are interdependent beings, because one cannot be a cyborg without forging connections to other "friendly selves" (150). In their multiple-shifting identities, they take "pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction" (152). The cyborg has become a powerful means of reasserting the material reality of the female body into postmodern thought.

Postmodern thought and disability studies both need the reassertion of the material body, because the ability to move away from the materiality of the body via technology or other means can only be achieved by individuals who occupy a position of privilege. As Sherryl Vint puts it, "The ability to construct the body as passé is a position available only to those privileged to think of their (white, male, straight, non-working-class) bodies as the norm" (9). Addressing the erasure of the material body, Anne Balsamo asks, "Isn't it ironic that the body disappears in postmodern theory just as women and feminists have emerged as an intellectual force within the human disciplines?" (31). People with disabilities, in particular, cannot get past the meat of the body, because attending to our bodily needs within a system structured by inequalities remains a pragmatic matter of survival. Despite the importance of the cyborg in reinserting the material body into postmodern theory and disability studies, one must be careful that the figure does not further amplify disability's relegation to a metaphorical function. It must be done in a way that examines the material and the social without further othering the disabled body.

Of the cyborg further othering the disabled body, Alison Kafer asserts in *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013) that academic writings on cyborgs tend to further binarize the disabled and the nondisabled because "their focus on cybertechnologies and human/machine interfaces tend to represent disability exclusively as an individual, medical problem, a position that depoliticizes disability and disabled people" (22). Kafer critiques the fetishistic association between people with disabilities and technologies that presupposes "a seamless link between 'cyborg' and 'disabled person' thanks to adaptive technology" (107). The idea of a natural pairing between the disabled body and technology is an ableist position because "[i]f nondisabled people are persuaded by the assertion that disabled people are real-life cyborgs, then cyborg status signals a distinction between nondisabled people and disabled people" (110). Kafer rightly asserts that the assumption that prosthetics and adaptive technologies work for or are desired by all bodies is counterproductive to severing the disabled body from metaphor and the narrative of the cure. Also, the focus on physical iterations of disability discounts invisible and psychiatric disabilities. Kafer notes that there is a way of "using [the cyborg] to stage our own blasphemous interventions in feminist theory" (106). Doing so "requires understanding disabled people as cyborgs not because of our *bodies* (e.g., our use of prosthetics, ventilators, or attendants), but because of our *political practices*" (120). Here, I would replace the term *political practices* with *interdependent relationships*. The disabled body does not automatically fit with technologies, but the material realities of our bodies and the practices they necessitate make us more aware of the need for interdependency and the conscientious evaluation of interdependent relationships. Some of these relationships are with machines, but just as many are with humans, animals, and the nonphysical as "other friendly selves."

Disability studies still needs the figure of the cyborg because looking at the material alongside the social consequences of the body while considering the role of interdependency is important to the field. With a large debt to feminist studies of identity, disability studies has moved toward interrogating the material realities of bodies. The social model of disability that focused on disability as a social construction was once vital to the movement as it broke from the medical model of disability, and "it defined disabled people as an oppressed group and highlighted barriers" (Shakespeare 267); however, "the social model has now become a barrier to further progress" (Shakespeare 272). The move in disability studies toward examining social and material realities at once has allowed for an exploration of the concept of interdependency. Interdependency is important to this study because representations of Keller as a passive child who is dependent on Sullivan are based on the false dichotomy between independence and dependence, rather than recognizing a third space of interdependence. The cyborg Helen Keller that emerges at the conclusion of Kreisberg and Rice's series refuses the idea that her body must fit with the assistive technology of the Omnicle to achieve wholeness; she rejects the Omnicle and recognizes her own interdependence.

Why are alternative representations of Keller so important? Well, to say that Keller is important to how we view disability, and women with disabilities in particular, is quite an understatement. Nielsen reminds us, "As the world's most famous person with an acknowledged disability in the twentieth century, whatever Keller wrote, spoke, or did mattered" (8). However, the adult, political, sexual Keller has not just been erased from our collective memory after her death, but these aspects of her identity were already subject to erasure during her lifetime as her more controversial writings actively were discounted through the claim that she was naively manipulated by radical organizations (Quicke 170). How Keller is represented is a microcosm of how disabled people—and disabled women in particular—are represented. The myths that silence her even after death prove that "cultural expectations, received attitudes, social institutions, and their attendant material conditions create a situation in which bodies that are categorized as both female and disabled are disadvantaged doubly and in parallel ways" (Garland-Thomson, "Reshaping" 4–5).

Issue 1 of *Helen Killer* begins with the familiar narrative of the Teacher, feral child, and water-pump. The first page shows the dark shadows of Sullivan and young Keller at the water-pump, with the child's figure seemingly growing out of Sullivan's torso (panel 1). The first panel gives off the emotion of the fearful and unknown, for as Will Eisner asserts, "shadow evokes fear" (149). Within the shadowy outlines of panels 5–9 comes the familiar and contrastingly bright and white image of the smaller hand of Helen finger-spelling "w-a-t-e-r" in the larger hand of Teacher. The page ends with the two shadowy figures embracing in an open shot that is juxtaposed in the middle of the words "Then came Teacher ..." and "Teacher slew Phantom" (3; panel 10). The thought bubbles that are used to narrate the beginning of Issue 1 appear to be pages ripped out of a children's picture book, and the scene further alludes to Keller's own third-person reference to her pre-communicative/pre-Sullivan self as "Phantom" (38). The retelling of the Teacher and water-pump story that begins Issue 1 seems in line with our cultural memory of Keller until page 2 of Issue 1, where it becomes clear that Kreisberg and Rice actually are invoking our cultural memory in order to trouble and disrupt it.

The image of Keller as a passive adolescent student needs to be disrupted, because as Nielsen notes, "The Helen Keller of political passion and action, the adult who did not die until 1968, is absent from *The Miracle Worker* and the warehouse quantity of children's and adult literature about her [...] She frequently did not like the world as it was and sought political frameworks for change" (1). The first issue of *Helen Killer* utilizes the conventions of a children's picture book and invokes the *Miracle Worker* version of Keller in order to break free of it and explore Keller's radical side within the comic form. A departure from the traditional narrative begins in Issue 1 on page 3, panel 1. Here, there is a long shot of Helen's father and mother running toward and embracing a brightly lit Keller and Sullivan. As Eisner explains, the long shot invites verisimilitude, and the lack of any borders containing the image invites the reader into the scene. These are "part of the non-verbal 'language' of sequential art" (44). A rectangular thought bubble that appears to be a ripped-out page from a story book states, "Like a transmogrification in a Fairy Tale, the feral beast was restored to her true form ..." (2; panel 1). The phrase "feral beast" offends at first, and the use of the concept of fairytale transformation seems in keeping with the narrative of overcoming disability, but on the right-hand corner is a panel within a panel with the foreboding closed shot of a large hand on the right-hand shoulder of a terrified-looking Helen. This visual on page 2 gives readers their first indication that the narrative before them is not a fairy tale where disability's value is in its curing or overcoming. Rather, there is something dark and ominous looming and present; the Phantom is still there.

At the bottom of page 4, there is the image of the brightly lit hand of Helen spelling "P-a-P-a" into the palm of her (also, brightly lit) father's hand frame by frame, surrounded by blackness (panels 5–8). Page 4 ends with an elated Papa Keller and young Helen, and the words, "She was once again a little girl." Yet, the next page immediately reintroduces more disturbing possibilities in another panel within a panel that queries, "But had Phantom truly been vanquished?" and "Or like another Fairy Tale was Phantom simply hiding in plain sight?" (5; panels 2–4). As Helen's adoring parents look on (5; panel 3), a caption describes her as "Cloaked in innocence," while three uniform panels spell out the singular lettering of "g-u-n" below. Then, directly juxtaposed against the fourth column of page 2 where "She was once again a little girl," the fourth frame of page 3 splits into a brightly lit long shot of Helen holding up a gun to the terrified and cringing figures of her mother, her father, and Sullivan, with the narration, "Until her thirst for vengeance at the world entire could not be slaked." The closed frame of a blackness-engulfed Helen is covered by a standard comic book onomatopoeia, "BLAM," which indicates the moment when picture book becomes comic. The ability of Kreisberg and Rice to invoke the Teacher/water-pump narrative in order to disrupt it has a great deal to do with the difference between "illustrations" and "visuals." Since an illustration "simply repeats or amplifies," an illustration has difficulty *not* representing the disabled female body in a normative and linear mode (Eisner 153). Alternatively, in comics, "A visual replaces text," so the comic form can provide means of troubling the representation of the disabled female body (Eisner 153), and *Helen Killer* does trouble the normative female body.

Kreisberg and Rice's series holds the possibility of narrative rupture, but within the opportunity for such rupture lies the possibility of *Helen Killer* becoming a superhero comic/science fiction work where disability is cured. Issue 1 culminates with Helen, a 21-year-old Radcliffe student, being trained by the Secret Service after she is altered by the Omnicle. Alexander Graham Bell invents the device, and it allows Helen to see and hear again. As Bell explains, "using LIGHT AND SOUND, My DEVICE FORMS ***NEW*** PATHWAY'S THROUGH HELEN'S DAMAGED BRAIN ALLOWING HER TO SEE AND HEAR AS ***WE*** DO" (17; panel 19). The phrasing of "damaged brain" would seem to invoke the need for a cure, and Keller's disabilities are in fact cured through Bell so that she may become an autonomous, productive, good American. Superhero comic books and science fiction both frequently use the narrative of the cure, which is why each holds both pathways and roadblocks to seeing bodies differently. With the narrative of the cure, both of these genres are often guilty of what David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder identify as the fourth step in "narrative prosthesis," where "the remainder of the story seeks to rehabilitate or fix the deviance in some manner" (53). As Mitchell and Snyder explain, "This fourth step of repair of deviance may involve obliteration of the difference through a 'cure,' the rescue of the despised object from social censure, the extermination of the deviant as a purification of the social body, or the reevaluation of an alternative mode of being" (54).

Although *Helen Killer* does invoke the narrative of the cure for some time, it ultimately does so only to reverse it in the final issue. The series also utilizes and challenges norms by working within the medium of comic books. As Susan Squier argues, "Shadowed as they are by the label abnormal, comics can offer a rich area in which to explore some crucial issues in disability studies" (72). Playing on the idea that it is okay for children to read comic books "so long as they grow out of it," she argues that comics have the potential to "rely on, and challenge, longstanding notions of normalcy, disability, and the comic book genre in order to articulate the embodied, ethical and sociopolitical experiences of impairment and disability" (72). In its reliance on the norm, there often emerges a danger of the phenomenon that José Alaniz dubs "*supercrip* overcoming."

The term *supercrip* is not a new one. As Alaniz describes it, "The *supercrip* represents the antithesis to that other despised master image of disability in mainstream culture: the sentimentalized, pathetic poster child wheeled out for telethons and tearjerkers. The *supercrip defies* pity" (31). Alaniz ties the *supercrip* figure to Silver Age superhero literature: "at the dawn of the Silver Age, the superhero's often-disabled alter ego came to incarnate the phallus-wilting tensions of postwar America, only to be magically exorcised, replaced with the usual vulnerability and potency" (55). He explains that the male anxieties that pervaded the changing world of the postwar era linked disability with femininity and with lack of autonomy, demanding that these traits be "exorcised" so the *supercrip* can become superhero once again and be contrasted with the supervillain.

The history of the association between disability and femininity further complicates the question of whether *Helen Killer* is guilty of "*supercrip* overcoming." Since (and perhaps even before) Aristotle defined woman as "mutilated man," women and disability have been linked in Western thought. While women who are considered "able-bodied" are sexually objectified by systems of representation, disabled women are rendered invisible. The disabled female comes to represent what Harlan Hahn characterizes as the "asexual objectification" of "people with disabilities" (qtd. in Garland-Thomson, "Integrating" 32). Helen Keller is subjected to "asexual objectification" before and after her death, so drawing her with breasts is important. What is more, she seems to get a little more voluptuous in each issue. Although Issue 1's cover depicts her with a very defined bosom, the post-childhood Helen contained inside dons a very prim Victorian costume that obscures her bosom entirely. Within the first pages of Issue 2, however, Helen appears darkly dressed in a sleek black dress that, although still appropriately Victorian in length, hugs tightly at her shapely breasts. Contrastingly, the cover of Issue 2 presents a close-up of Helen's face. Her lips and the bleeding American flag background on the cover are cherry red. She wears her cyborg glasses that grant her the power to see and hear, and the bleeding American flag in the background makes it look like a little girl's hair-bow. Her black Omnicle glasses reflect the shadowy figure of a gun-firing Leon Czolgosz, and the contrast between these visuals plays with the Madonna/Whore complex in relation to Keller and the American Dream. Helen's shadow is white and, unlike other covers, her profile is cut off just under the neck; her breasts are absent. However, the stars and stripes that give the impression of a little girl's hair-bow bleed into the American flag, which is literally covered with blood (presumably, the blood of Czolgosz). The red lipstick on Helen's lips is the same shade of red as both the flag and the splattered blood, evoking a simultaneously innocuous and threatening image.

Throughout the series, Kreisberg and Rice play with the sentimentalized, child-like, asexual depiction of the disabled female body in relation to the oversexualized and objectified normative female body. More often than not, they portray Helen as a sexual, and sexualized, being. This is significant in that, while science fiction and superhero comics have a history fraught with accusations of objectifying the female body, being seen as sexual beings who are actively in control of their own adult sexuality is more pressing for disabled women because they "often do not feel seen (because they are often not seen) by others as whole people, especially not as sexual people" (Wendell 268).

In the context of the superhero comics and identity studies, the *Helen Killer* series introduces us to identities and secret identities. In Issue 3 of the series, we are introduced to cyborg Helen Keller disguised as prostitute Helen Keller. Issue 3 begins with Helen in a psychiatric ward. Although she and her romantic interest, Agent Jonah Blaylock, have attempted to protect President McKinley from an assassination attempt in Issue 2, they failed due to the dark forces associated with her use of the Omnicle. The Omnicle actually taps into the forces of rage found in the center of the universe, so the device restores two of her five senses, but also fills her with murderous rage that lasts even when she removes the device. From the beginning of Issue 2 it begins to give Helen headaches, and by the end of that issue, she no longer controls turning the Omnicle on or off. Helen and Blaylock have left/been ousted from the Secret Service and are going rogue. They interrogate the jailed anarchist assassin Czolgosz, and discover that he is a pawn of supervillain scientist Elisha Grey and that financier fat-cat Roland Graves backs Grey. Since Graves frequents brothels, Helen disguises herself as a prostitute.

If Issue 1 shatters our cultural memory of Keller, then Issue 3 obliterates it. On the second panel of page 18, we are presented with a scandalously dressed Helen posing in a striped low-cut corset, with gloves, a choker, thigh highs with garters, and (apparently) talon-like fingers that resemble claws. She crosses her left leg over her right, while everyone in the room looks at her. The panel is a long shot without borders that invites the reader in to gaze at Helen, while her posture makes her appear powerful and larger than everyone in the room. Her geisha-like bun even explodes outside the panel and encroaches upon the panel above. The woman to her left scowls at her in what appears to be jealousy, as Helen becomes a sexual object for everyone in the room (and the reader) to gaze at. This particular depiction raises the question, is "sexual objectification" more desirable than "asexual objectification"? Here we might think of the example of Ellen Stohl, the paraplegic actress who posed for *Playboy* in 1987. She wrote to Hugh Hefner that she wanted to pose for the magazine because "sexuality is the hardest thing for disabled persons to hold onto" (qtd. in Garland-Thomson, "Integrating" 32). Although posing in *Playboy* is generally considered sexual objectification, according to Garland-Thomson, for the actress, "it would seem that the performance of excessive feminine sexuality was necessary to counter the social interpretation that disability cancels out sexuality" (32). Yes, cyborg Helen Keller is "performing excessive feminine sexuality," but in doing so she shatters the image of an asexual passive Keller, and more pragmatically, she is doing so in order to get at Graves and to force him to tell her the whereabouts of Grey.

The once partially blind Grey has regained sight by the same means as cyborg Helen, but Issue 4 will reverse the cure narrative when Helen frees herself from the Omnicle and gives up the two senses it has provided her. Here the reader finds out what is really behind the Omnicle's transformative abilities. After Bell, Blaylock, and Keller track Grey down with a newly built flying machine, Grey tells Helen that the source of her restored senses and his restored sight is the heart of the center of the universe that beats with rage and fury. It is the "prime mover" from which the Omnicle harnesses its power. Although the "prime mover" allows them both some form of sight, it is actually a force of darkness (17; panels 3–4). Rice clearly intends for Grey to be read as a supervillain, cartoonishly drawing him with ape-like features. As Grey and Keller begin a battle complete with "KAZAK," "FAP," and "CRACK" (17; panels 4–5), Grey flies up into the air and tells Helen, "WE ARE THE ONLY ***TRUE*** ANARCHISTS, YOU AND I, FOR ***THAT*** IS THE TRUE NATURE OF THE WORLD" (18; panel 1). Since the real-life Keller aligned herself with socialism, female suffrage, and workers' rights, associating anarchy with evil is a bit peculiar. Kreisberg takes much of Keller's biography into account, so it seems a strange move to align evil with anarchy. In any case, the series concludes with Helen defeating Grey, and in doing so, destroying the Omnicle.

When Helen demolishes the adaptive device that is the Omnicle, the narrative takes a different turn in terms of science fiction, superhero comics, and "narrative prosthesis." The series' conclusion reverses the aforementioned fourth step in "narrative prosthesis" where "the remainder of the story seeks to rehabilitate or fix the deviance in some manner" (Mitchell and Snyder 56). Instead, the story returns Helen to being blind and deaf, and depicts her as happy, finally free of "Phantom." So, ultimately disability does not represent something malicious that needs to be overcome; instead, the actual overcoming is in disabling the cure—an interesting twist that does in fact result in a new kind of cyborg, one that enjoys the third space of interdependency.

Interdependence challenges the dichotomy of independence versus dependence in relation to disability. As Petra Kuppers phrases it, "*Interdependence* is a word with resonance in disability culture circles, where the self-reliant individual is often out of reach, and self-reliance's ableist features discernable [sic]" (231). The binaries of independence versus dependence are part of a false dichotomy created by the American ideal of autonomous selfhood. Interdependence recognizes the connection between individuals who are mutually and physically responsible to one another without stigmatizing or prioritizing either party. A person with a disability being assisted in a daily task is not a dependent person burdening another with his or her care, because both parties benefit. In Kafer's framing of Loree Erickson's short film *Want* (2006), Kafer states that the relationship between Erickson and her attendant in the film is an example of a disabled person being a cyborg because of her *political practices*. Kafer states, "In this framing, Erickson can be understood in terms of cyborgism not because she has a disability that requires her to utilize attendant care, but because she critically thinks through what such uses might mean" (121). Again swapping out the term *political practices* for interdependent relationships, the cyborg Keller at the end of *Helen Killer* critically thinks through what it means to be interdependent, for although her return to a woman with deafness and blindness will make it necessary for her new fiancé Blaylock to assist her, he is clearly benefiting from his interactions with her too. So, while this final version of Helen Keller is once again blind and deaf, and also no longer a superhero, she is still definitely a cyborg not just because the ways in which she must physically touch and read lips with her hands in order to communicate trouble the boundaries between self and other, but further because she now critically thinks through what these interdependent relationships mean. This is true of her interdependent relationship with her cane as well, which is an extension of her body as much as the Omnicle ever was. Her relation to other humans and to her cane invokes Haraway's question, "Why should our bodies end at the skin?" (153). *Helen Killer*'s conclusion suggests that they shouldn't, and they don't, and that's a good thing.

In the conclusion, Keller confesses to Blaylock, "I just wish I could see and hear you"; his response is to remind her, suggestively, "You only need three senses for this" (p. 26; panel 5). Admittedly, a "happy" ending that implies Helen's role as wife and sexual partner to

Blaylock is more satisfying than her role as cyborg assassin Helen Killer is somewhat frustrating where traditional gender roles are concerned. However, a heterosexual partner identity is one identity among multiple shifting identities, and at least the ending recognizes Keller as an adult woman and capable sexual partner; a first in representations of Keller in graphic literature. The many identities and secret identities she tries on during the series remind us that identity is always in flux. Disability is a useful lens to look at identity categories, because it is the one identity category that connects us all, and disability shows the fluid nature of identity categories in general.

Works cited

Alaniz, José. *Death, Disability, and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2014.

Balsamo, Anne. *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996.

Eisner, Will. *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practice of the World's Most Popular Art Form*. Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press, 2004.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "Reshaping, Rethinking, Redefining: Feminist Disability Studies." In *Barbara Waxman Fiduccia Papers on Women and Girls with Disabilities*. Center for Women's Policy Studies (2001). Web. 20 Aug. 2014.

——— "The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography." In *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*. Ed. Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2002. 56–75.

——— "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory." In *Feminist Disability Studies*. Ed. Kim Q. Hall. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. 13–47.

Haraway, Donna J. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991.

Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2013.

Keller, Helen. *Teacher, Anne Sullivan Macy*. New York: Doubleday, 1995.

Kreisberg, Andrew (writer), Matthew J. L. D. Rice (p/illustrator). *Helen Killer* #1 (2007), Arcana Comics.

——— *Helen Killer* #2 (May 2008), Arcana Comics.

——— *Helen Killer* #3 (June 2008), Arcana Comics.

——— *Helen Killer* #4 (July 2008), Arcana Comics.

Kuppers, Petra. "Toward a Rhizomatic Model of Disability: Poetry, Performance, and Touch." Spec. Issue of the *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 3.3 (2009): 221–40.

Lambert, Joseph, Dakota McFadzean, and Pat Barret. *The Center for Cartoon Studies Presents Annie Sullivan and the Trials of Helen Keller*. New York: Disney Hyperion, 2012.

Le Guin, Ursula, and Brian Attebery, eds. *The Norton Book of Science Fiction*. New York: Norton, 2003.

The Miracle Worker. Dir. Arthurt Penn. Perf. Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke. Playfilm Productions, 1962. DVD.

Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001.

Nielsen, Kim E. *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller*. New York University Press, 2004. *Kindle* e-book file.

Quicke, J. C. "'Speaking Out': The Political Career of Helen Keller." *Disability, Handicap & Society* 3.2 (1988): 167–71.

Shakespeare, Tom. "The Social Model of Disability." In *The Disability Studies Reader*. Ed. Lennard J. Davis. 3rd ed. New York: Routledge, 2010. 266–73.

Squier, Susan. "So Long as They Grow Out of It: Comics, the Discourse of Developmental Normalcy, and Disability." *Journal of Medical Humanities* 29 (2008): 71–88.

Tepper, Mitchell S. "Sexuality and Disability: The Missing Discourse of Pleasure." *Sexuality and Disability* 8.4 (2000): 283–90.

Vint, Sherryl. *Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction*. University of Toronto Press, 2007.

Wendell, Susan. "Toward a Feminist Theory of Disability." In *The Disability Studies Reader*. Ed. Lennard Davis. New York: Routledge, 1997. 260–78.

10

Cripping the Bat: Troubling Images of Batman

Daniel Preston

In the following chapter I examine two Batman narratives through the theoretical lens of disability studies in order to demonstrate how comics continue to influence ways we think about disability and difference. Specifically, I argue that while the narratives of *Batman: KnightFall* and *Batman—Vampire* provide readers with representations of disability informed by both the medical and social models, these representations are often too reductive to push disability discourse beyond existing limits. Instead, when examined only within their own contexts, the conventions used in these stories succeed only in (re)establishing standardized and accepted ideas in a comfortable format. Focusing first on the ways that the sequence of events presented in *KnightFall* creates a problematic and abbreviated narrative of healing, I emphasize medical representations of disability in order to show how this narrative ignores many aspects of physical disability so that Bruce Wayne's character and activities remain recognizable to readers. Second, I examine *Batman—Vampire,* and note that the narrative is driven by addiction and images reminiscent of monsters and freaks. The use of the addiction device in the narrative is an important step toward the recognition of disabilities constructed from social perception rather than physical impairment; however, the storyline and imagery effectively extend freak show discourse and reinforce outdated and problematic representations. Despite these factors, and the recent acknowledgement by Dale Jacobs and Jay Dolmage that comics are a "rich, but fraught medium for mapping the ways that bodies are shaped by disability and trauma" (70), I finally suggest that comics are nonetheless a powerful tool for introducing models used by disability studies and ideas of social construction because they allow readers to see various ways that disability operates within narratives, and question the social impacts of disability; by doing so with superheroes, readers are more likely to internalize constructive insights.

My analyses of these narratives borrow heavily from narrative theory adapted by David T. Mitchell. Mitchell suggests that every narrative operates as a disability narrative when he writes, "The very need for a story is called into being when something has gone amiss with the known world [...] In this sense, stories compensate for an unknown or unnatural deviance that begs for an explanation" (20), and believes that readers need to understand that all narratives represent a disruption of routine. For Batman, comics have long established him as a powerful figure who has always preferred to use his intelligence and his wits over brute force, but images have still succeeded in normalizing Batman's figure and physique so that the stern visage and muscles that ripple through his costume demonstrate his masculinity and strength. As Edward Avery-Natale describes one cover image, "The muscles under his arms bulge, and the dark shadows represent an intimidating level of musculature that represents Batman's sheer power" (84). These descriptions and images define the standard that readers expect from Batman, but this understanding changed in considerable ways with the publication of *KnightFall*.

The fall of Batman

KnightFall chronicles the escalating attacks on Batman from nearly every member of his Rogues gallery.[1] Several villains have coordinated their assaults to wear down Bruce Wayne with the hope of a final, decisive defeat at the hands of a newly arrived nemesis named Bane. Readers of the *KnightFall* story see an increasingly bitter and beaten hero, but the true sense of disruption does not occur until Bane throws Batman to the Gotham streets. At this point, readers know that Bruce Wayne's story will transition into one of healing, and are at least temporarily curious about how Batman's story will continue. Next, readers see police calling for an ambulance, which arrives and takes Batman away. Readers discover that the EMTs are Alfred and Robin, who work to keep Batman's identity secret and return him to the Batcave. Once at the cave, Alfred realizes he requires Decadron to reduce spinal swelling, and notes that this is Bruce's "best chance for recovery" (Dixon, Nolan, and Hanna 14). The drug works, and Bruce names Jean-Paul Valley as his successor to the "mantle of Batman" who serves as Gotham's protector until Wayne returns. Later that night, Bruce is brought up to the manor. Within hours, a specialist is retained to aid Bruce's recovery and the needed medical equipment arrives. Soon Bruce's healer is kidnapped and the story begins two separate arcs. These arcs further support Mitchell's insistence on the ways that disability operates within narrative, as he suggests that "one cannot narrate the story of a healthy body [...] without the contrastive device of disability to bear out the symbolic potency of the message" (28). Therefore, to successfully relate the story of Bruce's disability, a nondisabled character, in this case, Valley, must be placed in the role of a healthy Batman.

As the stories continue, episodes which detail events leading to Bruce's recovery show him battling enemies from a manual wheelchair, and executing moves that would be nearly impossible given his condition, and making it appear as though the injuries he received were merely cosmetic—inconvenient rather than life-changing. This is followed by an international manhunt for kidnappers, a motorized chair equipped much like the Batmobile, and Bruce eventually emerging in costume and only using a cane. He is subsequently "cured" by a burst of psychic energy exchanged between two battling enemies.[2] Bruce returns to Gotham, and retrains his body, but still has to rediscover his purpose, and choose to enact the Batman persona once again.

Throughout the narrative, characters reveal that Valley has been violating the ethical code that Batman had maintained: he was killing the criminals of Gotham rather than capturing them. This remains a crucial distinction that exists between Batman and other heroes within the comic universe. As writer and comic executive Danny Fingeroth has noted: "Batman [...] takes the anger we feel at the world and puts it to constructive use. He is not the Hulk, blindly rampaging [... and his] rage is not the rage of the Punisher, who is essentially, a psychotic criminal" (Fingeroth 132). Batman remains a character who needs to be able to consider himself a hero rather than a villain, protecting life whenever possible, and so needs to remove his successor from power.

Bruce eventually offers the mantle of Batman to Dick Grayson, thereby repairing a rift in that relationship. Wayne spends time redesigning the Batsuit to accommodate the knowledge that his disability has granted him. According to storylines that follow *KnightFall*, the suit is now made of Kevlar and adds protection to the spinal column. Further revisions suggest that Bruce considers that others may have to wear the suit as well, and makes improvements based on those eventualities (Moench, Jones, and Beatty). These changes, and Bruce's later realization that he needs to expand his base of operations as well as his team of allies, suggest that Bruce has accepted his own mortality and the knowledge he gained from his experience with disability shapes future choices. However, regardless of the lessons learned after the battle, the presentation of this narrative is replete with problematic scenarios and representational concerns, many of which are discussed below.

Hero heal thyself

Narrative theorists suggest that the difference between a *story* and a *narrative* exists in the ways we organize the events and tell the story. One of the most crucial elements of narrative therefore becomes its chronology and the ways that time is handled both inside and outside narrative frames. In explaining this concept, H. Porter Abbott writes that it is possible to condense an entire day of events into a single sentence (14). In this way, writers and artists can manipulate the time it takes for events to occur, or to erase them completely. A careful reading of *KnightFall* concerned only with the time elapsed between Batman's "fall" and his return to Gotham reveals a lack of time references within the narrative itself. Of course, it would be difficult to argue for keeping Bruce Wayne's Batman seriously impaired for long, given his importance to the comic universe and his continued presence in other stories. The need to keep such an icon mobile and healthy provides a reason why Bruce's activity remains largely consistent, regardless of injury, but the presentation is still troubling. There are no markers present within the texts to indicate how much time it has taken Bruce to achieve each of the crucial healing steps needed for the activities mentioned above. Therefore, not only does this arc of *KnightFall* become troubling for disability theorists because it relies solely on the idea that healing completely is the only way in which Bruce Wayne can return to society and his role as Batman, but it also reduces (and often outright rejects) the individualized details involved in the process of moving forward with a physical disability.[3]

Gaps such as these provide opportunities for readers to add interpretive details of their own that allow the story to be complete. Wolfgang Iser has argued, "each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities; as he reads, he will make his own decision as to how the gap is to be filled" (qtd. in Abbott 85). Without specific details to guide the story, readers are free to add the details that make the most sense to them. This is even more problematic for a disability studies interpretation because the gaps themselves act to erase any need for explanation—the narrative as presented asks readers not to consider the complications involved in Bruce's injury and recovery, but instead to simply accept the fact that the wealth and status he has gained allow him to overcome any barriers he encounters, including the physical limitations that such an injury imposes.

The story of *KnightFall* relies on the premise of disability to ultimately show readers that Bruce Wayne is a more honorable Batman than his replacement, Valley. Disability is used as a way to temporarily remove Bruce from the suit, but the story does not truly investigate the complications that accompany the spinal cord injury he receives, nor the social impact that such an injury entails. In fact, Alfred seeks to keep Bruce's injury from public knowledge saying, "Were it generally known that Mister Wayne is incapacitated it would be perceived as **weakness** and his affairs could well suffer" (Moench, Aparo, and Burchett 11). The literal emphasis placed on weakness and cure throughout this story offers readers closure on the level of expectations (they expect that Bruce will be healed and he is), but leaves those interested in a more complex investigation of disability without closure on the level of empathy and knowledge because there are still several questions left open about how certain events came to pass. In the end, the narrative presentation of *KnightFall* only solidifies outdated ideas of ability.

Troubling images

In addition to problems within the narrative itself, several images that show the extent of Bruce's injuries are presented as full pages with onlookers just outside the frame. In a full page that follows Batman's fall, an image highlights each of Batman's visible injuries. Depicting Batman on his back and unconscious, the artists reveal broken ribs, a dislocated shoulder, a severely displaced leg, and a head injury. The panel also shows the crowd around him—some stare in curiosity while others turn away; a young child screams (Dixon, Nolan, and Hanna 5). Other images shortly after his return to the cave show the ways that Alfred has corrected and bandaged the injuries: a neck brace, a splinted and bandaged leg, and immobilized ribs. Like images of the initial fall, panels that show Bruce recovering also show Alfred, Robin, and Valley waiting for him to awake.

Staring, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson describes it, is made up of four elements: a physiological response that "draws us into a more forceful form of looking"; a cultural history that shapes what a stare means; a social relationship that exists between us and the object of our elongated look; and, finally, a way for us to gain knowledge of the subject (*Staring* 13–15). In several images, the act of staring is doubly authorized: the audience within the frame naturalizes the act because they are responding in culturally appropriate ways to unusual circumstances. Secondly, the presentation of the image as a full page grants permission to readers for them to stare as well. Therefore, staring is reinforced and adopted as "correct" behavior on the part of the reader when they automatically emulate what the characters are doing. Readers, like the characters in the images, are staring to gain knowledge as well. The questions that need answering involve what the injuries entail and how the narrative will continue, but this is also a step toward acceptance of a differently functioning body. In this way, "knowledge gathering is the most productive aspect of staring [because it offers ...] an opportunity to recognize one another in new ways" (Garland-Thomson, *Staring* 15). The use of these techniques may be productive in certain ways, but they are also reminiscent of the freak shows that took place in the early part of the twentieth century, where the narratives embedded in elaborate staging and pitchmen's speeches display and dehumanize their subjects for public entertainment.

Comic panel as freak show stage

For nearly one hundred years, people who were considered different were placed on display in freak shows for the pleasure of audiences.

During these events, "pitchmen" would describe these individuals in the most exotic terms possible to highlight their cultural abnormality and to create as much distance from the "normal" audience as possible. In *Freak Shows*, Robert Bogdan notes, regarding a giant at these shows, "being extremely tall is a matter of physiology—being a giant involves something more [...] The onstage freak is something else offstage [and ...] is the performance of a stylized presentation" (3).

The elaborate staging of a physically tall man that turned him into a giant often involved the creation of a particular context and environment around him on the stage. This would undoubtedly be followed with a medicalized or "scientifically based" narrative presented by the showmen, and authorized in full by the pamphlet that was distributed to audiences that told the "authentic" story of the "creature" who stood before them on stage. Writing about the cultural significance of this phenomenon, Garland-Thomson comments, "Together the staging, the pitchman's mediating spiel, the scientific testimony, and the written narrative fixed the [...] freak as a figure of otherness upon which the spectators could displace anxieties and uncertainties about their own identities" (*Extraordinary* 61). Disability theory suggests that these "freaks" were the invention of the narrative that the pitchman used and the environment in which they were staged. These narratives invariably erased the person behind the giant, and did not give audiences any sense of the lived experience of the man on stage.

For comics, the panel serves as stage, and villains like the Joker, Two-Face, and Killer Croc would fit right into the model of the nineteenth-century freak show. Therefore, these villains are ideal to demonstrate the aspects of freak shows. The criminals that Batman typically pursues comprise what Travis Langley refers to as a "Halloween Party" (101) in his book *Batman and Psychology: A Dark and Stormy Knight*. On the comic page, readers find the Joker, with his green hair, rouge-red lips and chalk-white skin; he never repeats the same story—not even of his own life—and enacts constant embellishment and reinvention (151). Therefore, readers are never sure how to define "normal" for the Joker, other than his physical characteristics. The clown-like coloring and the narratives that he creates for himself spark memories of circuses and side-shows, in which Joker freely admits he belongs.

Another one of Batman's foes who is often seen at circuses is Two-Face. Gotham attorney Harvey Dent was an ally for Batman until a crime boss used acid to divide his face into "beauty and ugliness" (Langley 175) thereby turning him into the criminal Two-Face. In this way, his existence reinforces the binary construction of disability, the able-bodied and beautiful in contrast with the horribly monstrous and frightening. For Dent there is no continuum of ability, no shades of gray, and so he too rejects the possibility of a story more complex than one ended by the flip of a coin.

There are other examples, like the human-reptile hybrid Killer Croc and Mr. Freeze (who can only survive in extreme cold), but the Joker and Two-Face represent two of Batman's most famous disfigured foes. These are the characters who are at first grotesque and strange, but whom readers see so often that their shocking physical features become normalized, until the shock and staring that were part of the initial acceptance of these characters have passed. Nevertheless, it becomes easy to think that Joker and Two-Face provide the literal opposing force to Batman's own dark, often reserved, and remarkably human representation.

By acknowledging the similarities between the comic representations of characters and the historical significance of freak shows, we can begin to deconstruct the problematic labels that these representations evoke. For example, to think of Joker and Two-Face as no more than psychologically deranged criminals without considering the ways in which their stories mirror Batman's own reduces the power the characters have and reinforces the stereotype that disfigurement is evil, and an unblemished form (like Wayne's prior to the *KnightFall* arc) is the only version of "good" there can be. In order to change perceptions of these characters and recognize their depth, readers must be willing to consider that Batman is just as complicated as each of his rogues, and that all these characters navigate the same line between what society considers acceptable and problematic. Afterward, the acceptance of the varying forms of normality can begin to grow. One example of a narrative that demonstrates how Batman can cross the line into criminality is *Batman—Vampire.*

Dark night: a socially enabled vampire

Like *KnightFall,* the story of *Vampire* focuses on a physically changed Bruce Wayne, but this time adds a psychological component as well that allows it to capitalize on ideas of monstrosity, and addiction. *Batman—Vampire* is set in an alternate universe where Batman confronts Dracula and is ultimately turned into a vampire himself. When the transformation is complete, Bruce Wayne no longer exists in human form; instead, Batman uses the vampire he has become to make full use of his persona and the fear it inspires. At first, Batman resists the bloodlust and need for killing that his new form requires, deciding to substitute blood products for the nutrients he must have, but eventually his need is too great, and Batman is forced to rethink his rigid moral code. He soon decides to kill the criminals of Gotham rather than capture them. Batman is then able to drink their blood, keeping himself "alive" and Gotham free of criminals. Meanwhile, Commissioner Gordon and others begin to question Batman's mental stability, and decide that his vigilante behavior must be stopped. After a final struggle that ends with all of his enemies defeated and friends killed, Batman walks into the sunlight and hopes for peace in eternity (Moench et al.). In certain ways, Batman's transition into a vampire once again relies on the freak show techniques discussed above; however, *Vampire* develops a much richer story than *KnightFall*, and shows us a character honestly confronting the truth that life has changed considerably.

Even though Batman's physicality has changed in this story, I do not argue that he is disabled in a physical way. Indeed, there are several points throughout the story where he is more powerful than his human form allowed. Rather, I suggest that Batman's existence as a vampire forced him into a state of psychological demise and addiction similar to alcohol or drugs.[4] In this story, the exception that "calls the narrative into being" (Mitchell 20) is the need for Batman to satisfy the bloodlust that his new condition requires. The plot is continually motivated as Batman negotiates his own sense of morality and his need to exist. Not surprisingly, Moench uses the same narrative device (Batman's decision to kill) in both of the stories discussed here, and in both, that decision demonstrates mental instability. Further, this narrative is arranged so that readers first see a perfectly normal-looking Batman, despite the fact that he has been turned. As the addiction and need for killing grows stronger, his outward appearance changes to more closely resemble the monster that he fears he is becoming. Part of the psychological battle being waged is one where Batman sees himself as one of the Halloween Party freaks that should be imprisoned.

By providing readers with images similar to that of nineteenth-century England, and a story that is modeled after Jack the Ripper, the writers and artists have reminded readers of the practices associated with that era and location. As Garland-Thomson points out, "Although extraordinary bodily forms have always been acknowledged as atypical, the cultural resonances accorded them arise from the historical and intellectual moments in which these bodies are embedded" *(Freakery* 2). Additionally, the vampire motif allows readers to imagine a world that is, as Ruth Bienstock Anolik suggests, "based on superstition and magical thinking" and therefore readers are not particularly troubled by the unnatural or supernatural events within the narrative (1). In this case, the form of the vampire would not be out of place or problematic in a world where the supernatural is commonplace. Therefore, Batman's altered physical appearance as a vampire is once again normalized based on environmental factors. The new form, however, is in line with the freak shows of the nineteenth century, and reinforces outdated ideas of stigma.

Utilizing this narrative technique falls back on the idea of stigma raised by Erving Goffman that Paul Longmore highlights as part of "Screening Stereotypes" where inward evil (in this case, Batman's psychological demise) is represented as outward disfigurement or disability (68). Goffman's argument suggests that an outward disfigurement defines its bearer as somehow "less than human," and in this case the narrative takes that to be a literal truth. However, in many ways, *Batman—Vampire* is much richer than that narrative device suggests; it is a more psychological story than *KnightFall*, and is concerned less with Bruce's physical changes than the alteration of his mental state. For example, at several points throughout his recovery during *KnightFall,* Bruce repeats phrases like "he [Bane] broke me" and "he beat me," whereas this version of Batman is more concerned with the fear he induces in others that goes far beyond what readers have previously seen.

One image in particular highlights the battle that is taking place between Batman's inner psychology and outward appearance. This graphic shows the exaggerated bones of the skull and the elongated mouth, filled with the razor-sharp teeth of the vampire. Above the image are the words, "Who will even dare face me?" while underneath are the words, "Who will brave the horrors of my hell?" (Moench et al. 132). The image alone depicts a character that has clearly transitioned into a social environment where he is uncomfortable, and what remains of his soul is speaking to an isolation that few can know. Along with the stylized and disturbing image, the text betrays what the consequences of his new form require, regardless of its apparent power.

Here, Batman seems to grapple with the true nature of being an outcast for the first time. Oddly, the "Batman as outcast" trope need not apply to this narrative in the traditional sense because the vampire Batman is one among hundreds of Gotham citizens who have been transformed. Therefore, it would be more convincing to argue that the "hell" he is thinking of here is not based on grotesque disfigurement or social isolation, but rather the loss of a moral certitude. Writers Jeffrey Kahan and Stanley Stewart argue that it is a superhero's morality, more than his bulging muscles, that makes him heroic (5). Regardless of his own internal battles, the one thing that makes Batman the hero whom so many admire is his ability to maintain his strict moral code. In this way, it is Batman's choice to break his unbreakable rule—to kill the criminals of Gotham for the sake of his own survival—that truly challenges him and is the crux of this story, because it forces Batman and readers to face the unfamiliar, and on much more violent terms than we are prepared for.

The presentation of the narrative is also much more complex when demonstrating the difficulties of "living" with the consequences associated with disability. For instance, rather than collapse time and ignore the process of Bruce's healing as happened in *KnightFall,* characters discuss the addiction plainly, and Moench even introduces Tanya, who had been turned but develops a serum and overcomes the need to kill (Moench et al. 49). The serum serves as a prosthetic and allows Tanya (and eventually Batman) to normalize their behaviors for a time, and because the appearance of the vampire is now commonplace in Gotham Batman is not "othered" by his physical features. Like Batman, Tanya is working toward living in a constructive way, using her serum to help others who are turned.

While the breaking of Bruce Wayne's back and his return to health that was presented within the *KnightFall* narrative represented the most prominent ways that Moench articulated physical disability, the *Batman—Vampire* trilogy represents a more complicated and nuanced story. Regardless of continued use of disability tropes of negativity and ultimate death, *Vampire* at least raises the possibility that Batman can continue despite his altered form and does not resort to a resolution that erases those experiences. *Batman—Vampire* shows readers a Batman disabled by addictions rather than physical limitations. This is still an overcoming narrative that uses Batman's morality as the central crux, but focusing on psychological rather than physical concerns allows Moench to demonstrate the ways that disability can be incorporated into daily living. For me, this is a step forward.

Troubling the gaps: teaching disability studies

One of the goals of theorists in disability studies has been to expose narratives that rely on outdated models of disability in part because those portrayals deny the complexity of lived experience. Also, the medical model assumes impairment and disability to be the same thing, thereby placing no responsibility on society at large to adapt to individuals. For *KnightFall,* the medical overtones of Bruce Wayne's paralysis and eventual return as Batman are necessary for the story to move and conclude as it does. *Vampire* demonstrates ways that addiction shapes the social interactions of affected individuals. It is not enough, however, to simply point out the ways that disability operates within a narrative, or to mention the social and physical implications. Kenneth Lindblom and Patricia Dunn describe that habit as they write: "One danger of constructivist conclusions, if they end there, is that they can lead to one after another argument that disability is socially constructed rather than an argument to change" (169).

Lindblom and Dunn suggest that when conversations of disability models arise, it becomes more important to work toward productive applications of disability theory. Therefore, despite the fact that these narratives often erase social and physical aspects of disability in favor of a narrative that concludes in comfortable ways that readers expect, bringing these narratives into humanities classrooms presents opportunities to expand student understanding of the nature of disability studies.

Demonstrating the erasures present in narratives as this chapter has done creates space for educators to introduce disability and disability theory into classrooms. Using narratives of Batman (a seemingly invincible character) in discussions of disability will increase student interest and connection with the topic. Research by Gorg Mollia suggests "comics are at a distinct advantage as attention grabbers and as ways of inducing reluctant students to become interested in and follow what is usually given to them in a traditionally text-based package" (para. 23). Additionally, as Mitchell points out, "To give an abstraction a literal body allows an ideology to simulate a foothold in the material world that it would otherwise fail to procure" (27). Providing students with a concrete example they recognize from comics has an effect similar to connecting to a student's personal experience. In fact, working through these narratives often elicits personal histories from students that allow others to understand disability on individual, social, and community levels that are much more complex and beneficial than the simplified comic versions.

One of the most productive ways to raise these questions in classrooms was suggested by Wendy Chrisman in "The Ways We Disclose." She writes, "Together as a class, make a chart on the social hierarchies of disability, the relative risks of disclosing each type of disability, the stigmas associated with each type, the material consequences" (135). Just as associating an individual body with disability provides a concrete form for an abstract idea, enumerating lists of social stigmas with students connects them to the ideas in a legible and tangible way. For narratives involving Batman and Bruce Wayne, economic consequences do not exist in any real form, unless readers consider Alfred's admission of weakness discussed earlier to be consequential. Therefore, producing a table or list of the consequences that Wayne *avoids* based on the way the narratives are presented offers more of a challenge to students. Examples to discuss could include medical insurance, the idea of waiting periods, the classification process that persons with disabilities have to navigate to get services, or the ways in which Wayne Manor would need to be modified so that Bruce can still be as active as possible. Early questions may focus on the medical aspects, but as students become comfortable with the topic, the social aspects become more apparent.

The inclusion of comic narratives in the classroom, especially ones that ignore so much disability experience in order to shape a compelling story, and asking students to consider the real-life consequences of fictional disabilities may seem trivial, but teachers in the Humanities have been using this technique for years. Raising questions presented by texts defines the practice of teaching. As Mitchell points out, "Once readers begin to actively seek out representations of disability in our literatures, it is difficult for them to avoid being struck by disability's tendency to proliferate in texts with which they believed themselves to be utterly familiar" (19). By challenging the nature of a story that many students think they know well, teachers offer a unique perspective, and the ability to examine the relevance of what they read to their daily experience.

Conclusion

In his early work on freak shows, Leslie Fiedler writes: "If the spell works [...] we see what we are supposed to see: the animal hybrid skulking at the edge of the jungle, the Giant [...] Jack cheated of his harp and hen. If however, the spell does not work or is broken [... we laugh] at ourselves for having dared believe in it" (283). Comic narratives work in much the same way. The medium has the ability to cast a spell on its readers and carry them away to universes protected by superheroes that cannot be hurt, and always—in the end at least—"get the bad guy." While careful analysis of the symbolism of any particular comic often reveals a relationship to the social and political era in which they were created, sometimes readers just want the magic to work. For a deeper understanding of what these narratives can teach us, however, disability studies allows us to look behind the magic. As problematic as these two narratives are, they remain tools that can be used to articulate the ideas of disability studies. Using comics to showcase disability narratives has definite advantages. First, it allows readers to identify disability in comfortable settings, and with characters they know. Second, this gives them the ability and the permission to wrestle with the concepts and realities of disability in private and personal ways, thereby making future transitions to acceptance much easier and free from the guilt and fear initially experienced when looking at images of their hero impaired on Gotham streets. Lastly, using comics to challenge outdated binaries of ability and demonstrate alternative thought patterns regarding social behaviors through unique configurations of image and text is a worthwhile step toward change.

Notes

1. My analysis of *KnightFall* focuses primarily on Bruce Wayne's recovery. This begins with the initial injury published in *Batman #497* (late July 1993) through the "cure" in *Legends of the Dark Knight* #61 (June 1994).

2. A large portion of these events are omitted from the collected versions currently in print and only show Bruce leaving Gotham in a manual chair, and returning without one.
3. Reversions like this took place much later too with Barbara Gordon. In 2011, DC Comics announced that the paralysis that forced Barbara to give up "Batgirl" and become the wheelchair-using "Oracle" would be erased, and Barbara would return to the "Batgirl" persona.
4. The ADA acknowledges the social stigma associated with addiction disorders like alcohol and drug abuse under tier three of its criteria where an individual may be "perceived as having an impairment" (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990).

Works cited

Abbott, H. Porter. *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Anolik, Ruth Bienstock, ed. *Demons of the Body and Mind: Essays on Disability in Gothic Literature*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2010.

Avery-Natale, Edward. "An Analysis of Embodiment Among Six Superheroes in DC Comics." *Social Thought and Research* 32 (2009): 71–106.

Bogdan, Robert C. *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*. University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Chrisman, Wendy. "The Ways We Disclose: When Life Writing Becomes Writing Your Life." In *Disability and the Teaching of Writing: A Critical Sourcebook*. Ed. Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson and Brenda Jo Brueggemann. Boston: Bedford / St. Martin's, 2008. 130–5.

Dixon, Chuck, Graham Nolan, and Scott Hanna. *Detective Comics #664*. New York: DC Comics, 1993.

Fiedler, Leslie. *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974.

Fingeroth, Danny. *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us About Ourselves and Our Society*. New York: Continuum, 2004.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie, ed. *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. New York University Press, 1996.

——— *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

——— *Staring: How We Look*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

Jacobs, Dale, and Jay Dolmage. "Difficult Articulations: Comics Autobiography, Trauma, and Disability." In *The Future of Text and Image: Collected Essays on Literary and Visual Conjunctures*. Ed. Ofra Amihay and Lauren Walsh. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012. 69–93.

Justice, U.S. Dept of. "The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990." n.d. Web. August 2013. www.ada.gov.

Kahan, Jeffrey, and Stanley Stewart. *Caped Crusaders 101: Composition Through Comic Books*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2006.

Langley, Travis. *Batman and Psychology: A Dark and Stormy Knight*. Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 2012.

Lindblom, Kenneth, and Patricia A. Dunn. "The Roles of Rhetoric in Constructions and Reconstructions of Disability." *Rhetoric Review* 22.2 (2003): 167–74.

Longmore, Paul K. "Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures." In *Images of the Disabled / Disabled Images*. Ed. Alan Gartner and Tom Joe. New York: Praeger, 1987. 65–78.

Mitchell, David T. "Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor." In *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*. Ed. Brenda Jo Brueggemann, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Sharon L. Snyder. New York: MLA, 2002. 15–30.

Moench, Doug, Jim Aparo, and Rick Burchett. *Batman #498*. New York: DC Comics, 1993.

Moench, Doug, Kelley Jones, and John Beatty. *Batman #515*. New York: DC Comics, 1995.

Moench, Doug, et al. *Tales of the Multiverse: Batman—Vampire*. New York: DC Comics, 2007.

Mollia, Gorg. "Learning from the Sequence: The Use of Comics in Instruction." *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comic Studies* 3.3 (2007). Web. 11 Sept. 2014.

11

Breaking Up [at/with] Illness Narratives

Kristen Gay

In recent years, the proliferation of illness memoir/autobiographical comics, in print and online, has led to ruptures within totalizing genre conventions that continue to inform writing about illness. Specifically, the genres of autobiographical comics and illness narratives, when brought together, form a subgenre of graphic novels that disrupt several imperatives inherited from ancient rhetoric for confessional writing. Such classical imperatives promote the fantasy of a coherent, autonomous self, seek to provide a rationale for illness, and move along the narrative trajectory from illness to recovery. However, in illness memoir/autobiographical comics, narrators commonly find themselves at odds with the diagnosis and expectations associated with their illness or disability, as Ellen Forney does in *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me*. In other texts, such as Allie Brosh's *Hyperbole and a Half: Unfortunate Situations, Flawed Coping Mechanisms, Mayhem, and Other Things that Happened,* artists struggle to rationalize the initial onset of their illness and to conclude their narrative with hopeful resolution. Far from demonstrating a lack of creativity on the part of such artists, these struggles to negotiate shifting identities and form narrative structures for unstructured illness experiences may rather be emblematic of the period in which we live.

The emerging genre of illness memoir/autobiographical comics responds to calls, from the medical humanities in particular, for new spaces to be found that might bring together various discourses pertaining to illness—subjective, professional, medical, and religious discourses, among others. For example, Ann Jurecic claims that "if doctors' offices and hospitals cannot function as spaces where personal meaning can be developed, then the existential questions about human fragility and significance have to be asked and answered elsewhere" (10). Jurecic calls for an alternative space where we might hold conversations about illness that are not bound to institutional conventions and power structures. Furthermore, responding to the struggle between patients and doctors for authority to speak for ailing bodies, Annemarie Mol argues that illnesses are not single, isolated phenomena but multifaceted medical and personal events. The complexity of illnesses, and the many forms they can take, leads to her call for appropriately complex discussions surrounding their study and treatment. She writes that we should "seek ways, *lay ways* so to speak, to freely talk about [daily experiences with illness]" (27). Thus, Mol supplements Jurecic's call for alternative spaces by reminding us that complex and "lay ways" for speaking about illness must be fostered within them. I posit that one such space might be found in the blurring of two genres, autobiographical comics and illness memoir, as they resist totalizing discourse about illness (that is, medical) in favor of subjective accounts that break up (at/with) ancient rhetorical tropes that call for certainty and coherence.

The spaces created within illness memoir/autobiographical comics seem to correlate with the concerns raised by Jurecic and Mol, and they are apt places for exploring these concerns because of their blending of comics and text, and comedy and tragedy. Forney's *Marbles* and Brosh's *Hyperbole and a Half* juxtapose the seriousness of their illnesses (bipolar disorder and depression, respectively) and medical interventions with comical descriptions of their subjective experiences. For example, both Forney and Brosh humorously describe what it's like to tell someone that they are struggling with a mental illness. Forney imagines herself telling others that she has bipolar disorder while a bomb explodes through the panel when she tries to utter the diagnosis (144). Similarly, Brosh comically reimagines her potential methods for telling family members that she wanted to kill herself, noting that a knock-knock joke might be "Too casual" (142). As these darkly comical retellings of potentially harrowing experiences suggest, finding ways to incorporate comedy into illness memoir/autobiographical comics helps prevent artists from becoming tragic figures who must be pitied. Forney's and Brosh's attempts to be seen as flawed, ordinary people enable them to provoke responses from readers about identity, communication surrounding disability, and the meaning found in a life lived with an illness.

This chapter will argue that the evolving genre of illness memoir/autobiographical comic opens up possibilities for writers to do more than seek meaning in their suffering—they might find ways of speaking about illness that defy totalization and celebrate the inexplicability of illness. While breaking with classical narrative traditions is not a novel idea, the generative potential of these particular emerging genres might open new conversations about illness, about how best to care for patients and how best to understand their experiences in a time when many scholars, such as Jurecic and Mol, are emphasizing the importance of such dialogue. More specifically, I will argue that Forney and Brosh break from classical genre conventions in order to maintain a sense of themselves within a medical model that largely erases subjective experience in order to represent the generalities of illness. In what follows, I will explore these disrupted imperatives by examining the ancient rhetorical tropes (from Aristotle and Augustine) to which Forney and Brosh respond. I will then offer a close reading of particular scenes in Forney's *Marbles* and Brosh's *Hyperbole and a Half* that break from these tropes to create alternative ways to view and share experiences with illness.

Aristotle and Augustine: general health and illness→recovery

While countless philosophers, writers, and artists have shaped the genres of illness memoirs and autobiographical comics, and confessional writing more generally, I emphasize two historical figures that have contributed to the totalization of discourse about illness, autobiography, and rhetoric: Aristotle and Augustine. First, the process of reducing a complex person's identity to their diagnosis's definition, and expecting her to behave in certain ways post-diagnosis, stems from Aristotle's conception of rhetoric and medicine. He infamously limits rhetoric's/medicine's ability to speak to the concerns and needs of individuals, and highlights their value in achieving consensus about the probable or general good. More specifically, he writes, in *On Rhetoric*:

> since no art examines the particular—for example, the art of medicine does not specify what is healthful for Socrates or Callias but for

> persons of a certain sort (this is a matter of art, while particulars are limitless and not knowable)—neither does rhetoric theorize about each opinion—what may seem to be so to Socrates or Hippias—but about what seems true to people of a certain sort. (1.2.11)

For Aristotle, rhetoric is responsible for representing the general values and needs of the Greek elite (such as Socrates or Callias). But by extension, as an art, it fails to respond to the voices that lack access to the acceptable forums for debate, and it favors the representation of general truths to the exclusion of subjective knowledge. Thus, Aristotle's rhetoric is primarily an elitist one, relying on a view of rhetoric that favors representation rather than individual experience.

The dangers of assuming that individual experiences of illness should be characterized solely by representative accounts can be easily imagined.[1] In general, as Jurecic, Mol, and Becky W. Thompson remind us, medical discourse perpetuates these exclusionary and reductive practices by aiming to speak about health—an individual and embodied experience—as a general matter. This can result, of course, in the reduction of the person who experiences an illness to their medical record and status as a patient; this has led some, such as Forney and Brosh, to re/present themselves as complex beings with unique desires and experiences through the illness memoir/autobiographical comic genre.

As Aristotle's conception of rhetoric and medicine strives to gain consensus about the generally good and true, Augustine of Hippo contributes to the confessional genre of writing in a way that might be confining to those who cannot explain their illnesses or promise recovery in their narratives. In *The Confessions of St. Augustine,* Augustine confesses his sinful past and present struggles in a series of prayer-like letters addressed to God. As he progresses through various narratives of loss and sin, he always comes back to a refrain about God's mercy and grace, God's hand in his life, and his certain hope of salvation. For example, in Book 3, Augustine describes his history with the sins of lust, sex, and pride, among others (52–5). However, by the end of Book 3, Augustine recounts the story of an answer that God gave to Augustine's mother when she feared that his soul was going to be lost forever. He explains, "You did then give her another answer through a priest of yours [...] My mother asked this bishop to be so kind as to discuss things with me, to expose my mistakes, to unteach me what was bad, and to teach me what was good" (67). While the bishop refuses to help Augustine, since he is "not yet fit to be taught," he does finally tell Augustine's mother, "As you live, it is impossible that the son of these tears should perish" (68). As Augustine recalls, "she took [this message] as though the words had sounded from heaven" (68). In this narrative, then, the despair of living in sin, which Augustine confesses, is countered by the certain (if retrospective) hope that Augustine finds in knowing that God had a plan for his life, a plan that can heal him of his sinful nature and ensure that all life events are purposeful. Most significantly for the present discussion, Augustine is able to identify the cause of his suffering—his own sinful actions—and pinpoint the cause of his absolute salvation—God's grace.

As these passages illustrate, Augustine's narrative generates a normative structure of autobiography that moves from trauma/turmoil to recovery/healing (or from sin to salvation, in Augustine's case). The expectation that autobiographical narratives should begin with trouble and end with a happy and certain conclusion, whether or not this conclusion is of a religious nature, still pervades the illness memoir genre. For example, Mary Karr's memoir *Lit* characterizes her harrowing experiences with alcoholism in detail, beginning with her description of her troubled childhood that contributed to her future struggles, and closing with a sudden conversion to Catholicism that helps her to recover and find peace. My goal is not to be critical of Karr or her experience; rather, I want to highlight the structure of her narrative, which, like so many others, begins with a rationalization of illness and ends with the relative calm of an institution (in this case, a religion, and in many other cases, medical or pharmacological institutions). For Karr, this structure works; for others, rationalizing illness may be impossible, and suggesting that there is hope for recovery might feel like self-deception.

These two traditions, of medicine focusing on what is "generally" healthy and autobiographical writing moving across a linear trouble→salvation (illness→recovery) trajectory, function to suppress difference and uncertainty. And it is to these very limitations in the rhetorical tradition that illness memoir/autobiographical comics respond. In what follows, I will specifically consider Forney's *Marbles* as it emphasizes the importance of maintaining a sense of one's self in the midst of a diagnosis with an illness. I will then turn to Brosh's

Hyperbole and a Half chapters about depression as an example of a generative break from narrative traditions that attempt to rationalize and resolve illness.

"I don't want a PURE LIFE just because I'm bipolar!": identity and identification in *Marbles*

In 2012, Forney, the cartoonist behind such comics as *I Love Led Zepellin* and *Monkey Food: The Complete "I Was Seven in '75" Collection*, published her graphic memoir entitled *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me*. In this memoir, Forney reflects on her experiences with bipolar disorder, her attempts to find a proper medicinal cocktail that might keep her relatively stable, and her fears of joining or being excluded from "Club van Gogh"—a club that she imagines for other bipolar, tortured artists (including Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and, of course, Vincent van Gogh). Forney characterizes the multiple ways in which she defines these members in an illustration of her official Club van Gogh card. Next to this card, which is labeled with her name, she writes a series of words that describe members: "Eccentric! Passionate! Tortured! Scary! Deadly! Fire! Ice! Unmoored! Unbridled! Unpredictable! Dangerous!" (22). In this illustration, Forney captures both her positive and her negative responses to being cast, by her diagnosis, into this crew of tortured artists. Nonetheless, Forney muses that membership in the club helps assuage the pain and "heaviness" of diagnosis, since this was "alleviated by a back-handed sense of cred" (22). Forney's post-diagnosis comics insist that her doctor does more than give her an official name for her illness when she tells her that she is bipolar—she also gives her an identity to inhabit.

While Forney initially seems to accept her diagnosis for giving a name to her fragmented experiences and awarding her membership in an impressive club of artists, she quickly becomes frightened by the implications of her diagnosis. In particular, she reveals her fear of becoming another suicide statistic, like Plath, Sexton, and van Gogh. She includes a drawing of an appendix from Kay Redfield Jamison's *Touched with Fire* that lists the names of other artists, poets, and writers who had bipolar disorder. Forney carefully marks with a small black cross those artists who committed suicide. The black crosses, and the black font used for the names on the list, match Forney's black thumbnails, which frame the image. She also lists suicide stats for bipolar disorder, noting that suicide attempts in the bipolar population are estimated to fall between "1 out of 4" or "1 out of 2" (44). At the bottom of the page, Forney draws herself enclosed in a black circle with a fearful look on her face. She bites her lip as she gazes into the distance and clutches the book in her hands. Beside her head, she draws a single exclamation mark as she processes these scary statistics (44). Thus, in an anti-Aristotelian move, Forney uneasily explores her discomfort with accepting a medical definition that might indicate her future propensity for suicide.

Also central to the struggles that Forney faces post-diagnosis are her attempts to reconcile her medical definition (bipolar I) and two other, vastly different identities: her identities as a stoner and an artist. Forney primarily fears that the medication she needs will detract from her ability to create comics, which she relies on both as a creative outlet and as a career. She reflects, "Along with my romantic preconceptions about what being a crazy artist meant ... were my terrified preconceptions about what being a medicated artist meant" (23). Next to this admission of fear, Forney draws a pristine balloon floating out of heart-shaped clouds beside a deflated balloon that is tightly tethered to a small box on a table. While Forney generally follows her doctor's advice, by reluctantly taking her medication despite her fears, she also refuses to stop smoking pot on a regular basis, and she hides this from her doctor during counseling sessions. She considers telling her doctor about her habit during a period of limited improvement, but she quickly talks herself out of it. Surrounding an image of Forney smoking pot out of an apple, a bunch of thought bubbles appear, including insights such as, "Being an outlaw is part of being an artist [...] It's something I share with my Mom, and I like that I have a stoner Mom [...] I don't want a PURE LIFE just because I'm bipolar! [...] It's what I do with most of my friends [...] Being a stoner is part of my identity" (156). Forney's repetition of the words "I" and "my," and her drawing of herself with the apple pipe—in which she casually exhales and wears an eclectic feather earring—demonstrate her process of clinging to her identity as a stoner in the face of a medical definition that threatens and conceals her subjectivity and uniqueness. Although she acknowledges that smoking pot may be limiting the effectiveness of her medicine in treating her bipolar disorder, she refuses to stop smoking or to tell her doctor because she wants to retain a sense of herself as a unique individual in the midst of her diagnosis.

Forney most powerfully reasserts her unique identity in the face of her medical diagnosis in her self-portraits. Forney drew portraits of herself in a sketchbook post-diagnosis, and she adds them to her narrative to demonstrate her range of emotional states. Forney notes, "it was really my sketchbook where I could face my emotional demons in a wholly personal way" (92). For example, in the self-portrait entitled "Crying in the Bathroom," Forney wears a thick sweater and a heavy hat, and she emphasizes dark, shadowy circles beneath her eyes with many overlapping pen strokes (100). She appears to be older than she is, since she draws wrinkles around her eyes, nose, and mouth, which is downturned. The eyes stare directly at the viewer, as if Forney is facing the reader as she is attempting to face her own reality. In the next self-portrait, labeled "Creepy Baby," Forney again looks directly at the viewer, but this time, her eyes appear mildly surprised. Her mouth is open and her eyes bulge slightly, but the shadows around her eyes are darker than before, and she seems frozen rather than animated (101). The specificity with which Forney captures her emotional state by emphasizing the uniqueness of her own face allows her to retain a sense of herself in the distressing experience of being diagnosed as bipolar. She explains that during nearly unbearable crying episodes, "In my sketchbook, I'd trace the familiar lines of my face, and I'd calm down and come back to myself" (98). Coming back to herself allows Forney to see herself, again, as a "human—a sad human—[rather than] the horrible monster I half-expected to see" (98). Thus, Forney's self-portraits mark a significant point at which she uses a visual medium to retain a sense of herself and her own unique identity post-diagnosis.

Despite the complexity of Forney's identities, and the difficulties she has making peace with them, she ultimately finds a way to view bipolar disorder as a part of her identity—not the sum of it. In a powerful image that pictures a black, claw-like hand extended beside a white hand making the sign for "Okay" that extends in the opposite direction, Forney asks, "Is Bipolar disorder a curse, a source of misery and pain? A dangerous, often life-threatening disease? Or an inextricable, even essential part of many creative personalities?" (225). On the following page, the two hands—the two poles of bipolar disorder, and perhaps Forney's two primary feelings about her diagnosis—are holding one another. She explains, "I suppose it's both. For better and worse, Bipolar disorder is an important part of who I am and how I think" (226). Here, Forney realizes that bipolar disorder is a part of—rather than a threat to—who she is, as a person and an artist. At the memoir's end, she takes this idea a step further when she visualizes her "younger self" and future self having a conversation about their illness. Her younger self cries and asks how long it will take until she has some relief from her pain; she also wants to know what her future will be like once her medication begins to regulate her illness. The younger self, leaning on the edge of her seat and dressed in a black shirt and zebra print pants, asks, "What is your life like?" And Forney's future self, dressed in the same zebra print pants but wearing a white shirt and sitting comfortably in her chair, responds, "It's different, but it's not really that different. I'm still you" (235). Forney's future self wears the same zebra print pants and sports a short, spiky pixie cut—seemingly a nod to her edgy identity as an artist, which she has retained as a medicated bipolar patient. As the white and black hands come to clasp each other, so Forney's past and future selves, wearing white and black shirts, come together to realize that they have not and will not lose themselves in their disorder.

Instead of neatly fitting herself into the identity that her diagnosis assigns to her, Forney rebels against it, feels threatened by it, and ultimately learns to oscillate along its borders. Forney is not alone in her fears that what she values about herself will be consumed by her status as a patient; her struggle in *Marbles* exemplifies a longstanding effort to decenter the autonomous human self and recognize our responsibility to respond to others and their plurality of identities. Notably, in *Breaking Up [at] Totality*, D. Diane Davis urges readers to reconsider the ways in which feigned certainty, and the pretense of the autonomous human subject, leads to exclusion in various forums—in discourse, interactions with others, and interactions with our selves. She writes, "The only book worth writing is the one that refuses to stabilize identities and strives to break them up, the one that strains toward the Unhearable and tries to crank it up. Why write? To attend to the call of the exscribed" (257). This call for unspeakable and unthinkable writing rejects, indirectly, the Aristotelian and Augustinian moves to totalize human thought and writing about life, even as it denies the possibility of stabilizing identities. Just as Davis points to the human subject's fragility and fragmentation as a state worthy of laughter rather than despair, Forney manages to generate a narrative about her experience with bipolar disorder that celebrates a lack of coherent identity. By refusing to be limited by her diagnosis, which is thrust upon her by the psychiatric institution, Forney insists that she is a dynamic person and artist who must be responded to rather than defined.

An "infinite laughter loop": narrative structure in *Hyperbole and a Half*

While several texts from the emerging genre of illness memoir/autobiographical comics attempt to disperse pretensions of a coherent self to be confessed, other texts undermine the confessional narrative structure that tends to move predictably from illness to recovery. Typically, in depression narratives, such as Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation* and Plath's *The Bell Jar*, the story begins with the writer experiencing some challenging life event or disappointing relationship (often with a parent) that explains the writer's struggle with depression. Then, the story progresses toward a moment of epiphany and recovery—in illness narratives, as mentioned previously in the Karr example, this sometimes takes the form of a suicide attempt, hospitalization, or intervention on the part of family members and friends.

While there is nothing inherently wrong with this progression, it does insist that an artist should follow a certain plot structure—beginning with a rationale for their illness, and ending with a hopeful conclusion. Such a structure also suggests a reverent and serious tone for writing about illness—one that may not be meaningful to some who try to characterize their experience with illness in a comical or sarcastic manner. More specifically, in Brosh's *Hyperbole and a Half*, she includes two chapters (previously published on her blog) that tell the story of her depression. In "Depression Part One," her story begins with a confession: "Some people have a legitimate reason to feel depressed, but not me. I just woke up one day feeling arbitrarily sad and helpless" (99). Instead of opening her narrative with an event that explains or rationalizes her traumatic breakdown, Brosh explains that depression simply happened to her one day for no reason that she could identify. Since she cannot explain her depression, Brosh recalls that she turned to shaming and bullying herself in an attempt to recover. In a dialogue that she imagines between her selves, one version of herself asks the depressed version: "Why are you crying? [...] The worst thing that has happened to you in the last three days is tearing the spout on your chocolate milk" (103). This opening passage establishes Brosh's frustration with her random and purposeless depression, and her sense that she does not deserve to be depressed.

It is worth noting that Brosh's depictions of herself differ dramatically from Forney's self-portraits. Brosh's art is extremely simplistic and abstract—her drawings of herself feature black, squiggly lines for arms and legs, wide circles for eyes, a yellow cone for her hair, and a pink dress. Brosh always pictures herself in this way, so to grasp changes in mood, readers must pay close attention to the eyes and mouth. In portraits of Brosh in "Depression Part One," for example, her mouth is very small and almost always closed and frowning. Unlike Forney, who captures details such as wrinkles and shadows beneath the eyes, Brosh's depiction of her mouth in these images represents her silent distress and the repeated frustration of waking up to the same feelings of depression. She also repeatedly draws her eyes as bulging, blank, and dazed. Her eyes seem expressionless, especially when drawn against a blank background of a solid color. For example, in a striking set of panels, Brosh draws identical images of herself that are stacked on top of one another. The first one captures her frozen frown and expressionless eyes as she stands in front of a solid blue background. The next panel remains exactly the same except for the words, "I feel like a computer" (113). Brosh's simplistic, repetitive, and even crude drawings of herself capture the distress of ongoing, inexplicable depression. While Forney retains a sense of herself in her self-portraits—and humanizes herself in the face of a potentially dehumanizing diagnosis—Brosh's drawings capture the despair of living with an illness that deadens the senses and will not change.

Brosh's inability to rationalize her experience with depression resurfaces again toward the end of the chapter, when she explains:

> If my life was a movie, the turning point of my depression would have been inspirational and meaningful. It would have involved wisdom-filled epiphanies about discovering my true self and I would conquer my demons and go on to live the rest of my life in happiness. Instead, my turning point mostly hinged upon the

> fact that I had rented some movies and then I didn't return them for too long. (113)

Here, Brosh mocks the idea that her depression should suddenly be imbued with meaningfulness at the end of the chapter, and that it should be transformed by a moment of recovery instigated by an institutional intervention. Not only is this moment quite quotidian—being forced to leave the house to return overdue movies—it also leads to the worsening, rather than the improvement, of her depression. While leaving the house to return the movies could signal the start of Brosh's recovery, she firmly notes that her perceived judgment from other customers in the store, and her recognition that she didn't care anymore, only deepened her struggle with depression. Her surprise at her lack of concern leaves her feeling numb because she "felt nothing" when seeing others while in an unkempt state rather than the "instant, crushing sense of self-consciousness" (115). In the final panels, as Brosh recognizes her detachment, she draws her eyes as angry and aggressive, rather than blank, sad, or uncertain. She writes, "And that's how my depression got so horrible that it actually broke through to the other side and became a sort of fear-proof exoskeleton" (119). While some might see this numbness as a kind of invincibility (and, by extension, a kind of recovery or epiphany), for Brosh, this moment exacerbates her depression by deadening her senses altogether; after all, Brosh notes that while "the invulnerability that accompanied the detachment was exhilarating" at first, the "horrible, soul-decaying boredom" of not being able to feel anything quickly becomes distressing, too (125). Rather than concluding the narrative with an assertion that she has been saved from her depression by an epiphanic moment, Brosh instead reveals that she has hit rock bottom.

Brosh continues to upend the emphasis on recovery within the confessional genre in "Depression Part Two," when she recalls sitting on the floor crying for no apparent reason while drinking a cup of juice. As she cries on the kitchen floor, she notices a small piece of corn beneath the refrigerator that suddenly overtakes her. She writes, "I don't know why this happened, but when I saw the piece of corn, something snapped inside of me, and then that thing twisted through a few permutations of logic that I don't understand, and produced the most confusing bout of uncontrollable, debilitating laughter that I have ever experienced" (150). In one panel, Brosh's eyes are flattened against the tile floor, which almost overtakes the entire panel. A tiny piece of corn sits beneath her eyes. In the following panel, Brosh convulses and cries as she falls backwards, laughing about the piece of corn. As she laughs hysterically, creating what she calls an "infinite laughter loop" because of her surprise at her own laughter, she realizes that she cannot explain her extreme emotional change (153). In fact, she mocks her own experience by creating a series of panels that review the (very non-Augustinian) timeline of events. In half of the panels, leading up to her laughter, a piece of corn gradually becomes larger and larger in the panels. On the following page, Brosh draws increasingly more versions of herself cracking up about the piece of corn. Instead of embracing this change, Brosh emphasizes its randomness, and its ability to produce release rather than recovery: "instead of telling a nice, heart-warming story about the support of people who loved me [...] I'm going to have to tell them about the piece of corn" (154). Her nonchalant reference to this event—and her slight embarrassment at the thought of trying to explain the significance of this moment to others—marks a drastic shift from attempting to find ultimate hope in a higher power.

Following her earlier shift away from the structural expectations of the illness narrative, Brosh mocks the imperative that illness narratives should end with a certain and inspirational message that recovery is possible as she concludes her chapter. She refuses to pretend that she now understands her depression, or that she has somehow been saved from it. While she does claim that she can feel again, this is a tentative and fragile state rather than a permanent recovery. The last page of the chapter, for example, pictures Brosh's character with a huge smile and her arms spread wide. She surrounds herself with a huge, colorful rainbow, smiling suns, smiling faces, and swirling circles. Beside this (comparatively) enthusiastic and bright image, she ends with the sarcastic message: "Maybe everything isn't hopeless bullshit" (156). Whereas Augustine trusts in his certainty and God's divine plan to get him through his journey from a sinful nature to eternal salvation, Brosh refuses to put her trust in what has been for her a very accidental and inexplicable experience, begun with sudden sadness and interrupted by random laughter.

This laughter, of course, echoes Davis's discussion of uncontrollable laughter in *Breaking Up [at] Totality*. The loss of control involved in what

Brosh calls an "infinite laughter loop," becomes, for Davis, a playful affront to the totalization of human identity and experience (153). Or, put another way, Davis contends:

> If we are periodically convulsed by a physiological manifestation of co(s)mic Laughter, we are also possessed by a *logos* that hails us into subject positions and speaks us. But the force of Laughter convulses language as well as bodies, giving the *logos* a Being of its own that is nonlogical and playful. (18)

When a narrative ends with a certain conclusion—as Augustine's end in reminder that he is a now a good man with hope for salvation—it also ends with a reaffirmation of the self and the logos as certain, coherent, and absolute. Instead, in a way that hearkens back to Davis's point, Brosh concludes her narrative with a bout of laughter, and this inexplicable moment leads to a tentative hope for recovery as struggle. Her ambivalent conclusion rejects the imperative that illness memoirs should end with a message of hope, and instead accepts what cannot be known—what can only continue to be lived.

Conclusion

As the previous analysis highlights, the emergence of the genre of illness memoir/autobiographical comics might generate spaces for speaking about illness that respond to the limitations of medical institutions, which can define and treat illnesses but cannot always help us live with them. Perhaps what is most significant about Forney's and Brosh's assertions that people with illnesses are complex individuals, and that their narratives about illnesses should not be tasked with its rationalization or a promise of recovery, is that it invites rhetorical conversations about responsibility and alternative ways of knowing. If we allow medicine or psychiatry to wholly define a patient and dictate her experience, then we risk viewing illnesses and the people who experience them from a narrow and ostensibly objective perspective. The impulse to define and categorize people with illnesses can supersede our responsibility to find ways to care for others, learn from their diverse ways of seeing and experiencing the world, and to do what is so deceptively difficult: to listen to those who speak. Forney and Brosh, and countless others, demand to be heard through the panels that comprise their stories, and the gaps in between, rather than through their definitions in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, or what Forney has called "the bible of mental disorders" (NPR). In an interview with NPR, titled, "Memoir Traces How Cartoonist Lost Her 'Marbles,'" Forney explains the strange experience of seeing herself described on the pages of the *DSM*, which composed an incomplete but fairly accurate picture of her struggles with mania and depression. She elaborates, "we went through the symptoms, one by one, and it sank in. And it was just a very, very strange, strange feeling to see what I had thought of—in particular when I was manic—as super-duper me; exponentially me; very, very, very me. And to see it right there in a book" (NPR). I suggest that what Forney's and Brosh's texts do so brilliantly is break up their definitions from the pages of the *DSM* by reasserting what is "exponentially them" (to borrow Forney's phrase) within their illnesses. Their diagnoses do not wholly define them; they rather provide the impetus for Forney and Brosh to negotiate and reinvent the ways in which they define themselves.

Note

1. I do not wish to deny that readers might experience solidarity with authors who characterize their illnesses. Part of the popularity of the illness memoir/autobiographical comics genre seems to be the ability people have to identify with writers' descriptions of experiences with illness. However, I make a distinction here between identification and representation. To say that I might identify with a writer's experience, to some extent, is not the same as assuming that any person's entire identity can be represented by a general diagnosis.

Works cited

Aristotle. *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*. Trans. George A. Kennedy. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2007.

Augustine. *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. Trans. Rex Warner. New York: New American Library, 1963.

Brosh, Allie. *Hyperbole and a Half: Unfortunate Situations, Flawed Coping Mechanisms, Mayhem, and Other Things that Happened*. New York: Touchstone, 2013.

Davis, D. Diane. *Breaking Up [at] Totality: A Rhetoric of Laughter*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000.

Forney, Ellen. *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me*. New York: Gotham Books, 2012.

Jurecic, Ann. *Illness as Narrative*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012.
Karr, Mary. *Lit*. New York: Harper, 2009.
Mol, Annemarie. *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002.
NPR. "Memoir Traces How Cartoonist Lost Her 'Marbles.'" n.p., 26 Nov. 2012. Web. 15 Aug. 2014.
Thompson, Becky W. *A Hunger So Wide and So Deep: A Multiracial View of Women's Eating Problems*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

12

Thinking through Thea: Alison Bechdel's Representations of Disability

Margaret Galvan

In 2006, Robert McRuer published his groundbreaking *Crip Theory*, which theorized the intersection of queerness and disability. Building on Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" by developing a parallel concept of compulsory able-bodiedness, McRuer argued that both of these compulsory identities are "contingent" on each other and produce strain on physical bodies (89). By bringing queer theory and disability studies into conversation with each other, McRuer hoped not only to "collectively [transform]" the preexisting system but also to "[imagine] bodies and desires otherwise" (97). Also in 2006, Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home* made a huge splash, quickly bringing her mainstream acclaim for her deft handling of the queer identities of herself and her father. In the years since, *Fun Home* has become one of the most studied and theorized comics, but while critical assessments deftly untangle and analyze how Bechdel's queerness inflects the memoir, they sideline the shared identity of disability that plays a key role in the comic's plot and structure. How might not only this strand of identity, but also Bechdel's embrace of the intersection between queerness and disability here and in her earlier work with *Dykes to Watch Out For*, make good on McRuer's hope for the potential of queer/disability studies?

The fifth chapter of *Fun Home* most fully treats disability as Bechdel explores her childhood bout with obsessive-compulsive disorder. In fact, this chapter doles out clinical assessments for Bechdel's family members, such that the investigation of her own youthful compulsions is nested within the larger scope of a neurological family portrait. Her father may not have been only queer, but more specifically a "manic-depressive, closeted fag" (132), and her family as a whole figures as a "mildly autistic" artist "colony" (139).[1] Subtler psychological pronouncements pervade the text, paralleling the queer subtext.

Critical assessments of *Fun Home* have nodded toward the obsession present in the production of the text—both Ann Cvetkovich and Valerie Rohy discuss how Bechdel has reproduced a dizzying array of personal documents. Both extensively catalog the various types of materials reproduced, and Cvetkovich also inventories the literary archive of writers Bechdel draws upon in order to tell her family's story (Rohy 341; Cvetkovich 122). Hillary Chute looks outside of the text to unpack the obsession inherent in Bechdel's practice of posing and photographing herself for each character in every panel of the book (200). Ultimately, Chute uses this fact in service of a larger point about how this practice allows Bechdel to connect with her queer father in the making of the text by literally embodying him (200). Similarly, both Rohy and Cvetkovich understand the obsession as part of a larger queer worldview. Because these critics mark obsession as queer, they do not consider obsessive-compulsive disorder as an identity on its own merits, one that when more fully fleshed out intersects and informs Bechdel's lived experience of queerness.

To explore obsession on its own terms, and obsessive-compulsive disorder as something that permeates Bechdel's work as much as her queer identity, it is important to reread and resituate Bechdel's obsessive approach and form. Rohy's, Cvetkovich's, and Chute's insights about obsessive process and reproduction figure here, as does Julia Watson's understanding of *Fun Home*'s narrative as one that progresses through a recursive structure (37). Watson also acknowledges Bechdel's obsessive-compulsive disorder, but she only briefly discusses it in a series of paragraphs destined for "further theorizing" while untangling the recursive structure as linked to "Bechdel's mapping of sexual legacies over generations" (30).

To get at the deeper quality of how obsession impacts the comic's structure, I will analyze how Bechdel recursively meditates on certain phenomena, ruminating over these events and recontextualizing them in different directions. These obsessions undergird a visually intricate story and speak to the subtle manner of obsession, just as the wealth of photographs, literary allusions, maps, et cetera celebrate it on a grander scale. These quieter, structural ruminations position Bechdel in neurological proximity to and nest her queer identity alongside her obsessive-compulsive disorder, her patterns approximating Lennard J. Davis's discussion of obsession and the visual arts.

The recursive structure of *Fun Home* allows Bechdel to ceaselessly negotiate her relationship with her father in an attempt to move closer to him. At the text's end, she admits, "we were close. But not close enough" (225), foreclosing an impossible intimacy she approaches at the end of chapter four when she compares photos of herself and her father across the bounds of time, noting, "It's about as close as a translation can get" (120). This idea of translation speaks through echoing as Bechdel herself occupies similar positions to her father on subsequent pages. For instance, on the page following one where her father calls roll as teacher (33), she plays at the family business in the role of her father in the same location on the page (35). These two panels approximately lay over each other and show the father's two professions as English teacher and mortician with Bechdel displacing him in the latter one. In the panel preceding her mimicry, we see her father in the background gazing down into the grave just as Bechdel does in the foreground one panel later.

In addition to these subtle parallels and interconnections, Bechdel also repeats panels over the course of the narrative, especially those concerning the father's death and his life trajectory. The representation of her father's death (28, 59, 89) is never quite the same—she is constantly revising the incident and shows that by depicting it from multiple perspectives (from the father's side [28], medium shot/hypothetical survival [59], head-on [89]). The maps of their hometown and its environs (30–1, 126–7, 140, 146), however, are stable and accurate—facts Bechdel can hold onto.

So, then, how does Bechdel herself fit into this recursive structure, and how does she demonstrate that she articulates herself through her father? She accomplishes this by duplicating panels of herself in her own revelatory moment—when her mother told her that her father had slept with men (top left, 59; middle, 79; top right, 211). Each panel shows her in the exact same position in the same space. Although she's fixed in place (unlike her father whose death is, in image, more mobile), she's the one who survives, the one who moves beyond the map. Through this fixed moment, Bechdel charts and recharts her relation to self and father.

When Bechdel first portrays this event, a hypothetical image of her father not being struck by a truck follows (59). Her mother reveals her father's homosexuality to Bechdel in response to her own coming out, and, soon after, he dies. Because of this sequence of events, Bechdel feels that her coming out as a lesbian is intimately linked to her father's death. In this version of the event, Bechdel focuses closely in on her body receiving this news, portraying only the edges of other items that delineate her identity: a book on Sappho, a sketch pad, a plaid shirt.

When Bechdel replays this scene, however, she depicts more of the room and, thus, more of herself. In the pages between these two images, Bechdel has been tracing out her incipient identity as a lesbian, which reflects itself in this new panel that shows her desk containing books on homosexuality (including Anaïs Nin's *Delta of Venus*, a text she masturbates to a few pages earlier) (76). The surrounding panels show her negotiating her sexuality in a letter answering her mother's response to her coming out and also in her decision to attend a Gay Union meeting at college. Her own sexuality surrounds and intersects with the revelation—further fleshed out in this retelling—that her father's affairs with men included the babysitter, Roy.

Many pages follow before Bechdel again revisits the scene near the very end of the book (211). There, she focuses in more closely than before, cutting off the edges of her body and showing virtually none of the material objects that littered the previous two versions of the panel. By this point, we have traveled with Bechdel through her coming out as a lesbian, such that these material reminders are no longer necessary. Her father, however, remains an enigma; the panels that enclose this one feature a phone call with and letter from her father in which he speaks elliptically about his own sexuality while accepting hers. All instances of this event foreground this revelation as central to Bechdel's own coming out, but this third panel illustrates how she is still dealing with her father's sexuality long after she's addressed her own. The first two versions of the panel confirm that ephemera of her sexuality surround her in the room, but she still grapples with her father's sexuality, which she must grasp for in less accessible bits and pieces.

Her father's death and her coming out are moments obsessively meditated on—her father's death, outside of her own experience, opens up into a myriad of possibilities as Bechdel imagines the event over and over—nodding toward her revisionary rumination by imagining it from multiple angles. Her moment of coming out, however, is simply reframed and recontextualized. That these moments are moved through over and over again highlights them as the obsessive centerpoints that undergird Bechdel's story and drive forward her narrative. In effect, these moments of rumination produce story. As she has alluded to in interviews, Bechdel had been thinking about this story for years before she had started to work on it and then spent seven years crafting the intricate tale (Chute 178).

However, Bechdel's investigations of and interest in the coalescence of queerness and disability does not just neatly coincide with McRuer's contribution to the growing and diversifying theoretical fields of queer theory and disability studies. Rather, her attention to these identities reaches back two decades across the span of her earlier work. McRuer provides the contemporary theoretical articulation for the intersection between queerness and disability, but both he and Bechdel develop their thoughts on the linkages between these identities through Rich and her early 1980s meditations on compulsory heterosexuality. Indeed, while Rich bemoans that "lesbian existence has been *written out of* history," Bechdel strives to *draw it in* in a way that celebrates a host of differences during a decade in which such difference put pressure on feminism to change (Rich 50; my emphasis). In effect, we see intersectionality *avant la lettre*, one that attempts to "[imagine] bodies and desires otherwise" as McRuer envisions in academic discourse 20 years later.

In the years before *Fun Home*, Bechdel was mostly known for her *Dykes to Watch Out For* comic strip. Since 1987, the *Dykes* strip has followed a diverse cast of recurring characters. Fittingly, given the passage of the landmark Americans with Disabilities Act the previous year, Bechdel introduces Thea, a Jewish lesbian with multiple sclerosis, in 1991. The activist communities surrounding Bechdel were thinking through issues of disability, as illustrated by the *Dykes, Disability, & Stuff* periodical (which published its first issue in 1988 and continued to publish quarterly before folding in 2004). In the character folder on Thea in her papers housed in the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College, Bechdel includes Volume 6, Issue 2–3 of *Dykes, Disability, & Stuff*, which features one poem, one article, and one short play about people in wheelchairs, among relevant news items and the like. This text and other materials help Bechdel create Thea as a rounded character who embraces her wheelchair and responds vociferously to any perceived prejudice.

Over the course of *Dykes to Watch Out For*, Thea appears in around 50 of the strips (or, only around 10 percent of the total run), but she occupies a large affective footprint. Hired as a buyer for Madwimmin Books, she straddles the position of a major/minor character. Following her entrance into the strip, she appears on a majority of the covers for the *DTWOF* calendars that Bechdel produced from 1990 to 1997. Her participation in the story ends when Madwimmin closes in 2002, but Thea's story arcs had already dwindled by that point such that she was more part of the bookstore's ensemble cast than a character with her own individual trajectory. In two major storylines that involve Thea, in 1993 and 1996–97, her disability and her lesbian sexuality coincide as she's foregrounded as a romantic interest. Her introduction to the comic strip, along with these story arcs, establish her as a rounded character whose disability affects other characters (who must work through their prejudices about her).

We first hear mention of Thea in "The Blow" (#118) where Jezanna, Madwimmin's owner, announces she has hired Thea for the position of buyer, disappointing the career prospects of current employees and strip regulars, Mo and Lois (*DTWOF: The Sequel* 88–9). Since Thea isn't present when Jezanna makes the announcement, Jezanna describes her over the course of five panels, starting off with: "Her name's Thea. She's new in town. Maybe you saw her when she brought her resumé in last week. She walks with crutches." Jezanna forefronts the visible aspect of Thea's disability here and draws Mo and Lois in by insisting that "maybe you saw her [...] last week." However, the circle does not include the readers, as this moment transpires outside of the strip, creating Thea as a spectral presence that Jezanna evokes on the page by describing Thea's bodily particularity before mentioning her prior job experience, artistic endeavors, great personality, and stellar references. In the last, punchline panel, Mo further highlights Thea's disability by griping, "Jezanna, I can't believe you passed up me and Lois for some stranger just because she's disabled!" With this complaint, Mo effaces the qualifications of the past four panels, unable to see Thea past her crutches. In her prejudice, Mo accuses Jezanna of reverse discrimination, her exclamation highlighting her own intolerance and gesturing to the unspoken reality—that even though new laws prohibited employment discrimination because of disability, Thea and those like her continue to face prejudice in the workplace.

In the following strip, "Yup-ward Bound" (#119), Mo qualifies her own prejudice while dining with her yuppie lesbian couple friends, Toni and Clarice (*DTWOF: The Sequel* 90–1). Shoveling a salsa-covered chip into her mouth, Mo whines, "She just hired this woman because disability's a hot issue and it makes the bookstore look P.C.!" Here, Mo latches onto the moment of historical specificity created by the ADA. Again, Mo erases any of Thea's other qualifications, insisting that she got the job *because of* her disability. These two strips build anticipation for Thea's physical introduction, especially because of the growing potential for conflict with Mo, whose steaming self-righteousness is nearing a boiling point. Soon after we meet Thea in "Turf Tiff" (#121), we encounter her a few strips later in "… A Rolling Donut" (#124), where we see her not on crutches, but in a wheelchair instead, upending expectations of her physicality (*DTWOF: The Sequel* 94–5, 100–1). Foot-perpetually-in-her-mouth Mo can't help but point out this difference, but significantly she asks Lois, not Thea herself, about it. By ignoring Thea yet talking about her within ear range, Mo inadvertently jumpstarts a face-to-face confrontation with Thea, who wheels herself to the front of the store in order to address and rebut Mo's prejudice. To explain her use of the wheelchair, Thea breaks into humor, cracking four jokes over the next few panels before revealing the truth of the matter: that the wheelchair is key on days when she feels overly fatigued. These jokes do not sufficiently lighten the mood, as Mo follows up with another obnoxious observation and Thea resorts to an angry retort that sends Mo off in a huff. Through this altercation, Thea reveals her sense of humor and emotional range. She refuses to be a static, one-note character, rejecting the toxic exchange where she simply reveals personal details to inappropriately curious others. This entire strip further introduces Thea and addresses her disability, but Thea insists on doing it on her terms, denying and casting out well-meaning but ignorant "able-bodied women," a qualifier Thea lobs at Mo.

After that zippy introduction, however, Thea's participation in the comic decreases, as she appears only once as part of the bookstore ensemble in the next 20 strips before making another splash in a deliberatively self-reflexive strip about the state of the comic where the characters reflect on what should happen in the narrative. In

"The Plot Thickens" (#145), Thea lobbies hard against the addition of new characters—or "personnel"—"until [she gets] properly established here!" (*Spawn of DTWOF* 46–7). As in the previous comic, Thea speaks up for herself, demanding a level of inclusion that seemed imminent after "... A Rolling Donut," but which has so far remained an unfulfilled promise. In the following panel, Thea directly accuses Bechdel of using her for her disability, just as Mo lobbed that charge at Jezanna when she announced her hiring decision. In this panel, a medium close-up from breast up, Thea raises her crutch to make it visible and menacingly waves it while exclaiming: "I thought I was gonna get to be a whole, 2-dimensional character like the rest of you! But nooo. I just show up on my crutches every tenth episode, like a goddamn poster child!" With this claim, Thea asserts that Bechdel has not acted with progressive intentions in introducing her to the strip, but instead creates a hollow sense of inclusion that would position Thea along the edge of the narrative, right where disabled characters often reside in literature. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson relates, "Disabled literary characters usually remain on the margins of fiction as uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens whose bodily configurations operate as spectacles, eliciting responses from other characters or producing rhetorical effects that depend on disability's cultural resonance" (9). Here, Garland-Thomson argues that these sidelined figures of disability "operate as spectacles" for the other characters to simply react to. Thea has challenged this position already through taking charge of the situation when Mo questioned her use of the wheelchair, but, there and here, Thea has had to make herself into a vocal spectacle in order to have her body and desires heard. In these moments, she is very much reacting only out of the position of her disability rather than being able to inhabit any of the other identities that Jezanna remarked upon in explaining her hiring decision.

In this tense comic, Thea does fill this "poster child" criterion, appearing some ten or so episodes after her last appearance and speaking from the position of disability. However, it is as if Bechdel uses this moment to chastise herself for not fully establishing Thea and for giving her little opportunity to breathe on the page outside of her disability. Within ten strips following this one, Thea gains a story arc of her own as her partner is introduced and Mo starts to develop feelings for Thea, heightened as they journey on the bus together to the 1993 March on Washington. Where these introductory scenes lean heavily on her disability, Thea moves past this sticking point and gains another dimension. Soon, she's just as often discussing her identities as Jewish, artist, and monogamous (later, married) with her lesbian partner, Maxine. Although her disability is visible most of the time she's on the page in her reliance on crutches or a wheelchair and it does form the basis of climactic moments within her character arc, she moves out of the realm of poster child by inhabiting a more active role in the plot.

In this story-arc and the following one, Thea's disability becomes part of—but not all of—the story. Both of these storylines involve Mo's desire, and in both instances Thea frustrates, at least temporarily, these feelings. From the get-go, Thea acts as an impasse for Mo to negotiate, as she seemingly inhibits Mo's career growth by taking the bookseller job. Thea ultimately promotes Mo's emotional and political growth, however, by forcing her to move beyond her prejudice and check her privilege and self-righteousness, especially at the very personal level of desire. A moment that embodies this growth happens outside of these defined arcs in a strip, "Postfeminist Funk," featured as the September comic in the 1993 *DTWOF* calendar and reprinted in the 1998 *The Indelible Alison Bechdel* retrospective (*Indelible* 138).

In this strip, Mo returns to the bookstore following a march and chastises both Lois and Thea for their lack of involvement in the action. Both of them preemptively challenge Mo's shaming, with Thea arguing most strongly about why focusing on her art practice is a valid form of participation in the movement. Here, Thea vocally challenges Mo to think about inhabiting her politics differently—pointing out the limitations in her conceptions of political organizing, drawing from her position as an artist just as much as from her experience as a person with a physical disability. In her final remark, she asserts, "My art is my political work!," echoing that tenet of feminism that the personal is political, which Lois dittoes from the position of postcoital glow. The exchange here between Mo and Thea echoes "… A Rolling Donut" except that Thea isn't pulling any punches here about her critiques of the movement. Since they're all drawing on common experience, Thea does not feel as if she has to make Mo comfortable by joking around as she did about her disability. Interestingly, although Mo is most often seen as Bechdel's avatar, here Thea more closely inhabits that role as she takes on the position of the artist who contributes to the movement through seemingly indirect means. Thea values and validates Bechdel's activist credit.

This tenor of biting exchange between Thea and Mo fans the flame of mutual desire, which remains largely unrequited because of Thea's loyalty to and monogamy with Maxine. That is, once Mo moves through her initial prejudice, their vibrant banter turns her on rather than sets her off. This desire limns Mo's actions for much of 1993, from the March on Washington in April up until New Year's Eve. In the two strips that treat the March, "One Big Happy" (#160) and "After-Glow" (#161), Bechdel focuses not on the actions in DC but on the bus trips up and back that generate Mo's desire for Thea, particularly on the ride home as Thea gives Mo a much-needed back massage that leaves her blissfully speechless (*Spawn of DTWOF* 76–9). Their attraction reaches a boiling point near the end of the year in "Hot Stuff" (#174), when all they can do is stare into each other's eyes in an uncharacteristic close-up shot of their exchange, and then climaxes in "A Kiss Is Just A Kiss" (#178) with a confusing and brief New Year's kiss that breaks the intensity between them (*Unnatural DTWOF* 14–15, 22–3). Although nothing more transpires between the two, this kiss thaws Mo's sex drive as she starts to date other women and allows Thea more room on the page to develop as a character in her own right.

From her introduction through this moment, as we've watched Thea circumnavigate the page and discovered more about her character, we have not learned anything more about her disability, aside from her explanation about her alternating use of crutches and wheelchairs. In fact, it's five years from when Thea first appears in the strip until we know the name of her physical disability. In a paragraph about the character's development in *The Indelible Alison Bechdel*, Bechdel explains why she waited so long to identify Thea's disability:

> I didn't specify exactly what her disability was for quite a while—we just knew that she had good days when she could get around on crutches and bad days when she used a chair. I did this partly because I wanted to present her disability as just a part of who she was, and also because I could never think of a way to mention it that wasn't heavy-handed. (*Indelible* 68)

Because Bechdel refuses to name Thea's disability and marks it only through what movement prosthesis she employs, Bechdel clears story space to explore Thea as a full character rather than simply one with a chronic illness or as just a "poster child." Arguably, however, while this surface treatment humanizes Thea for readers who have not met people with disabilities and may be prejudiced like Mo at first is, we learn little more about what other struggles Thea might face as a result of her disability. Rather, we remain superficially engaged, aware of Thea's disability only as it presents itself in these visible ways. The revelation of Thea's disability as multiple sclerosis nuances our understanding of her character in less visible ways.

This disclosure comes within Thea's second major storyline, which again revolves around Mo's desire, although here it's about a woman who amorously pursues Mo: a female professor, Sydney, who's newly arrived in town. Thea participates in this plot as someone who already knows and severely dislikes Sydney, such that she tries to prevent Mo from interacting with her, although, initially, she won't qualify her hostility. When Mo's feelings begin to develop, Thea breaks and relates her past history with Sydney in "The Trouble with Sydney" (#252) (*Hot, Throbbing DTWOF* 70–1). Bechdel visually inserts this story as a flashback in panels outlined with wavy, rather than straight, lines. Although this may seem like a slight alteration, the strictures placed on Bechdel's form, in needing to be easily reproducible across many periodicals, means that there exists little room for any variation from the rectangular panels. Moreover, this technique is stylistically distinct, employed virtually nowhere else across Bechdel's *DTWOF* oeuvre. This revelatory backstory is doubly highlighted, then, through this flashback motif. How might Bechdel have developed this plot if she were allowed the larger canvas of a graphic narrative like *Fun Home*? Even here, as Thea tells her tale, we focus on her face in past and present and those of her interlocutors in the present time as she reveals bombshell after bombshell and all—save Sydney—emote.

In this past sequence, we see Sydney and Thea as young lovers at the pivotal moment where Thea reveals to Sydney that she has been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. In Sydney's response, we learn about its physical trajectories: that it is degenerative and may incapacitate a person's ability to walk. Almost immediately after this revelation, Sydney breaks up with and abandons Thea. Both her diagnosis and Sydney's unfeeling response occupy a similar amount of space in the strip, such that Lois, Mo, and the readers are asked to weigh which is more catastrophic. As we know of Thea's current stable situation with a committed partner juxtaposed with her continuing contempt for Sydney, her abandonment still stings more, necessitating this dive into past pain in an attempt to save Mo from a similar fate. Although we learn the name of her condition, this affective information ultimately carries more weight within the story, while Bechdel's treatment of Thea's experience with the now-named multiple sclerosis remains static. In the world outside of the story, the naming of her disability is significant for how it allows a point of identification for those who have multiple sclerosis or have a loved one who has the disease.

Bechdel preserved this sort of response in her papers archived at Smith College in the aforementioned folder of materials about Thea, which contains various newspaper clippings about multiple sclerosis. In a few printed email exchanges with fans of the strip who wrote after "The Trouble with Sydney," Bechdel admits that she does not personally know anyone with multiple sclerosis, but these communications confirm that she's portrayed Thea appropriately. In one response, Therry Neilsen-Steinhardt writes to Bechdel:

> I kind of knew all along that Thea had M.S. When she appeared in her chair for the first time, and talked about how she had some low energy days, I thought, "AHA!" See, I have M.S. too, and while I'm doing fairly well and don't look disabled, I have some pretty bad days myself [...] I think you're handling Thea's character well—her use of humor and her lightning temper and her careful defence of her boundaries sound deeply real to me. ("Therry Neilsen-Steinhardt to Alison Bechdel")

This response suggests that even without naming Thea's condition earlier, those in the know have already been able to connect with Thea, implying that this revelation potentially serves to educate those unconnected to the realities of multiple sclerosis, just as developing this character has placed Bechdel herself in that position. Elsewhere in her response, Neilsen-Steinhardt suggests some additional visible and emotional markers Thea might exhibit because of her multiple sclerosis, but here remarks that Bechdel has deftly handled the emotional contours of Thea's experience. By being vulnerable and naming her disability, Bechdel not only allows Mo and Lois to connect with Thea, but she also facilitates these links with the readers, who can identify with her physical travails and her emotional stance even if her experience only sketches out the broad contours of living with multiple sclerosis.

After she shares her story, Thea ultimately backs off from her harsh stance on Sydney when the latter apologizes, but Bechdel herself later admits that she does not know if she fully trusts Sydney's apology (*Indelible* 68). In either case, as she takes a step back, Thea again retreats into the plot, functioning more as an ensemble member of the bookstore cast. No subsequent, sustained storylines for Thea follow, leaving Bechdel little room to explore any of Neilsen-Steinhardt's more involved suggestions. Through her participation in the bookstore, she continually engages her fellow coworkers on the basis of her many identities, which include multiple sclerosis. In some sense, the static representation of her disability acts as a marker of hope—we don't see her degenerating and don't engage with her along that basis. Rather, in taking multiple sclerosis at face value, it becomes part of Thea that she successfully negotiates. Arguably, Bechdel could push her character farther, but reserves recuperation narratives for other characters like Lois (who struggles with depression) and Sydney (who survives breast cancer). With Thea, we experience her chronic illness as a facet of her identity and her visible self-presentation.

What does it mean to think through Thea as a comics character who subtly disrupts Bechdel's regimented comics structure when the admission of her disability prompts Bechdel to denote flashback through wavy-lined panels? What can we draw from her feisty fortitude and strength to fight ignorance with humor while maintaining her privacy by rejecting the advances of the protagonist? While she never becomes a major character, Thea breaks through Garland-Thomson's noted barrier of being a marginal figure for the able-bodied to reflect upon, refusing that fate in her confrontation with Mo in "... A Rolling Donut" and later in her fight with Bechdel in "The Plot Thickens." Thea's disruptions both of formal and narrative structures and of personal prejudice resonate so forcefully that they challenge a text which often serves as an important touchstone within the field of comics studies. Scott McCloud's 1993

Understanding Comics generated a lot of terms and ideas that scholars use widely today when analyzing comics. However, in discussing the form of comics through the medium itself, some of the core assumptions that come from his own subject position as straight, white, able-bodied male threaten to exclude difference from the frame.[2] In his chapter on closure, when McCloud writes about how the senses interact in the comic, he uses his own body as an example.

In a series of panels where he draws himself from different distances and thus portrays only parts of his body, McCloud begins, "In this panel you can't even see my legs, yet you assume that they're there," before ending with the punchline after a silent panel where he looks down at his body, "even though they're not!" (61). In this example, he argues that the audience assumes an able-bodied stance, but this assumption rests with McCloud, as well, who blithely jokes about this situation and does not reflect on the possibility or visibility for different bodily forms. Here, when we don't see McCloud's legs, we can still assume that when we see them next, they will both be there, unscathed, and he likely will be standing. With Thea, however, the equation becomes a little more difficult. Sometimes from this position, we can see her crutches or ascertain by her height relative to other characters whether she's seated on a stool, in a chair, or in her wheelchair. In discussing comics structure, McCloud inadvertently implicates his body in discourse, unlike Thierry Groensteen, who (writing in text only) separates the structural elements of the comics page from their content. By focusing on framing and panel layout, Groensteen does not limit the bodies or experiences that can fill the structure he delineates.

If we read Bechdel's work as another example of theory, we can see her comics as speaking a visual politics of diversity, arguing that there's space in the panel and on the page for a wide range of identities and life experiences. Bechdel heeds Rich's call to make lesbians a visible part of history and anticipates McRuer's call to embody dykes with disabilities on the page. With the recursive meditations of *Fun Home* and its larger canvas, we can further see how a particular disability might more deeply inform the very structure of a comic itself and come to speak for queer identity, as well.

In juxtaposing the widely acclaimed and recent *Fun Home* with the long-running and foundational *Dykes to Watch Out For*, I seek not only to trace Bechdel's textual-visual theorizations of bodily and sexual diversity across her comics, but also to encourage further scholarship on her understudied earlier material. While *Fun Home* is, justifiably, one of the most widely taught and written-about graphic works, there are necessarily limitations in the scope of this autobiographical tale. Bechdel's two decades of comics work previous to *Fun Home* provide a rich array of representation and emerge in conversation with activist counterculture, as the periodicals in the archived character folder on Thea attest to and as *DTWOF*'s publication history in numerous grassroots newspapers nationally and internationally corroborate. What more can we understand about intersectional representations of disability, sexuality, and other attributes like race, gender, and class if we theorize not only through the Bechdel of *Fun Home*, but also through Thea, the other diverse characters of *DTWOF*, and the grassroots comics and activist communities that surround them?

Notes

1. While she fully explores her own obsessive-compulsive disorder, these other diagnoses are only mentioned in passing as they relate to and reflect off of Bechdel. While she treats her own condition seriously, the flip manner with which she deploys these other qualifiers for impact—whether or not they are accurate—shows a limitation to her storytelling method. That she more fully treats her father as homosexual could be seen as evidence of her greater experience in and with the LGBT community as comics artist and activist.
2. This position on McCloud emerges out of a 2013 MLA panel, "Re-*Understanding Comics*," that I organized and moderated, which featured contributions by Samantha Close, David Bahr, Michael Chaney, and Charles Hatfield, and which provoked insightful remarks from Jonathan W. Gray and Hillary Chute, who were in attendance. Sustained discussion with Gray about McCloud's trouble with identity categories in his discussion of the icon in Chapter Two, necessarily informs my position here.

Works cited

Bechdel, Alison. *Dykes to Watch Out For: The Sequel*. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1992.
——— *Spawn of Dykes to Watch Out For*. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1993.
——— *Unnatural Dykes to Watch Out For.* Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1995.
——— *Hot, Throbbing Dykes to Watch Out For*. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1997.
——— *The Indelible Alison Bechdel: Confessions, Comix, and Miscellaneous Dykes to Watch Out For.* Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1998.

——— *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. New York: Mariner Books, 2007.

Chute, Hillary L. *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

Cvetkovich, Ann. "Drawing the Archive in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36.1–2 (2008): 111–28.

Davis, Lennard J. *Obsession: A History*. University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Dykes, Disability & Stuff 6 (2–3). Alison Bechdel Papers, Accn. #08S–104, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

Groensteen, Thierry. *The System of Comics*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1994.

McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York University Press, 2006.

Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." In *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–1985*. Reissue edition. New York: W. W. Norton, 1994. 23–75.

Rohy, Valerie. "In the Queer Archive: *Fun Home*." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16.3 (2010): 341–61.

"Therry Neilsen-Steinhardt to Alison Bechdel." 2 June 1997. Alison Bechdel Papers, Accn. #08S–104. Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

Watson, Julia. "Autographic Disclosures and Genealogies of Desire in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*." *Biography* 31.1 (2008): 27–58.

Index

Page locators in italics refer to figures