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NOTE

Truth, Politics and Disability: Graphic Narratives as Illustrated Hope

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Citizenship in the 21st century may necessitate new and novel means of practice and expression. The graphic novel form can allow for these new means of expression, especially in regards to an important issue in any society: the issue of disability. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how a comic, created by the author, was used to spark conversations and new understandings around the topic of disability and citizenship.

Keywords: Citizenship; Creative Democracy; Graphic Novel Form; Graphic Research; symbolism

Citizenship in the 21st century necessitates new and novel means of practice and expression. I posit that the comics medium, with its combination of word and text, ability to engender emotional responses, use of symbolism, use of panels, as well as its nonlinear capabilities (Cabero, 2019; Duncan, Smith & Levitz, 2015; Groensteen, 2007; McCloud, 2006; Sousanis, 2015) can allow for these new means of expression in the republic, especially with regard to the issue of disability. The purpose of this paper is to showcase such a comic. The comic was created by the author in an attempt to demonstrate how comics can be a political form of expression.

Disability and Citizenship

In the United States, the last forty years has seen the enactment of a number of policies with regard to disability, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to name a few. And while the passage of policies is crucial, it may not be enough for true change. In order for policies to be truly effective, it is the culture that undergirds policies that must be

changed (Duncombe & Lambert, 2018.). People must come to truly believe in what those policies espouse if those policies are to be effective. And as Duncombe and Lambert (2018) note, art may be a way to change that culture and help people truly believe in change. This paper is situated at this intersection of policy and culture, specifically as it relates to disability policy in the United States. Comics can be a way to tap into the cultural fabric which undergirds those policies and case law on disability. I situate my usage of comics in the rich, if complicated, relationship between comics and disability (Garland-Thompson, 2016). Further, Duncombe and Lambert (2018) note how art can help us create a new vision of the world. I follow this sentiment, and use comics to accomplish this task.

While disability is a very personal issue, it is also an issue that must be considered from a political and citizenship standpoint. What are the responsibilities of government toward those with disabilities? How does the treatment of people with disabilities and policies to those effects play out in the republic? What are non-disabled citizens' attitudes toward those with disabilities and how may these attitudes affect public action? How do people with disabilities go about their daily lives in the republic? I should note that these questions are both scholarly and personal for me. My wife was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis some time back. Her disability forced me- an, able-bodied person, to confront things I had no experience with, such as caring for someone with a disability, my own advantages as an able-bodied person, and the legal elements of disability (e.g. applying for handicapped parking).

The term citizenship can mean different things to different people, and has been the source of raucous debates, especially in the social studies literature (Ross, Mathison & Vinson, 2014; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). For the purpose of this paper, I see citizenship as having three features: the pursuit of justice for vulnerable populations, the notion of creativity or "creative democracy", and the notion of diversity (Dewey, 1939; Parker, 1996; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Any discussion of citizenship may also have to be cast within the volatility of the present age. Politics cannot be a solely logical endeavor (Duncombe, 2019). According to Duncombe (2019), political actors (and specifically progressives) must appeal to people's hopes

and dreams, progressives must inspire people based on visions of a better world. Duncombe (2019, 174) also notes that dreams can be brought to life in what he calls an “ethical spectacle.” These ethical spectacles, like dreams, are not be realizable, and they cannot be lies, but rather serve as a way to imagine something better. Further, emotions, individual identity and symbols are also woven into the fabric of our politics and collective action we take as citizens (Duncombe, 2019; Mason, 2016; National Council of the Social Studies, 2020).

I think a discussion of disability can be framed within the points above. Obviously, any discussion of disability is a discussion about justice for vulnerable populations. But a discussion of disability is also a question of how citizens continually create and recreate their democracy (Dewey, 1939; Parker, 1996). The way disabled people are viewed and the way they interact in the American republic is much different now than it was a century ago, and most likely will be different a century from now. Some of this may be evolving attitudes, but much of the difference in treatment is also the result of advocacy, research and the contributions of people with disabilities. Finally, if all of these points are cast in the backdrop of Duncombe’s (2019) ideas, specifically the notion of utilizing symbols and stories to tell the truth and make political statements, as well as making these dreams manifest, then disability must be a story, it must be a dream to inspire people. If disability becomes not a dry policy issue, but rather used in a story, it may be able to tap into that cultural fabric which undergirds our policies. It can become justice, but a dynamic and evolving form of justice which inspires people. Hopefully, my comic can serve this purpose, it can move beyond traditional policy debates and toward a more radical vision of politics which appeals to peoples hopes and dreams.

Disability and Comics

There is some great work being done with regard to disability and comics already that I situate my work in and that has inspired me in various ways which I explore below. Foss, Gray and Whalen’s (2016) edited book, *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives* brings together a number of scholars and viewpoints around the issues of disability and representation in comics. In this volume, Garland-Thomson

(2016, pg. xi) argues that comics offer so many elements, from “textual, graphic, and sequential narrative...textual dialogue, thought bubbles, pictured embodiments” and others. As a result:

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 (Garland Thomson, 2016, xi–xii).

Later she notes “comics allow us to...make new stories about human experience” (Garland-Thomson, 2016, xii). I think Garland-Thomson’s (2016) ideas encapsulate the intent of this paper, comics can be used to tell these new types of rich and complex stories. Further, I think these types of stories can be cast as a dream (Duncombe, 2019) to guide future political understandings and help to reimagine and continually recreate democracy.

Dolmage and Jacobs (2016), Koch (2016) and Gay’s (2016) work, all contained in Foss, Gray and Whalen (2016), I think further demonstrate Garland-Thompson’s ideas above. In addition all three works are important for my own comic and are an excellent demonstration of the uses of the comics medium with regard to disability. Dolmage and Jacobs (2016) examine Georgia Webber’s work *Dumb*, which focuses on the experiences of a woman who loses her voice for an extended period of time. They demonstrate how Webber is able to expertly utilize such elements as arthrological linkages between panels and creative uses of color to name a few to convey powerful messages with regard to disability. Specifically, Webber “takes advantage of the possibility in the comics medium of articulating multiple narratives simultaneously” (Dolmage & Jacobs, 2016, 20). Similarly, Koch (2016) examines David Small’s *Stitches*. This story centers on a boy who loses his ability to speak. Small uses the comics medium to convey some of these feelings, such as by utilizing a number of wordless frames to portray silence (Koch, 2016). In addition, Koch (2016) points out Small’s depiction of memory. Small weaves the memories of his ordeal with present

time. Koch (2016, 39) argues that Small “negotiates the relation of visual perception, imagination and memory...in a predominantly ‘silent’ fashion.” Gay (2016) also notes that the art itself and how characters are drawn work to convey messages with regard to disability in comics. In her examination of Ellen Forney’s *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me*, Gay (2016, 181) asserts that Forney’s drawings and self-portraits “humanizes” the character “in the face of a potentially dehumanizing diagnosis.”

Alaniz’s (2016) examination of Batgirl/Oracle saga in Foss, Gray and Whalen (2016) is especially important to my own work. Alaniz (2016) examines the complicated history of Batgirl. Barbara Gordon, Lieutenant Jim Gordon’s daughter, who is also Batgirl, was paralyzed by the Joker who shot her in the spine. She lost the use of her legs and needed a wheelchair. And yet, as Alaniz (2016) shows, Gordon became something more because of her disability. After her disability (and after an internal struggle with accepting her disability), she took on a new identity, that of the Oracle (Alaniz, 2016). Alaniz argues the character becomes something more than she was previously, she finds a new and higher purpose than she ever had as Batgirl. Alaniz goes on to posit that “the newly realized Gordon in public concretizes the post-ADA [American with Disabilities Act] vision of the disabled subject as a full member of society...” (2016, pg. 63) and challenges the idea that people with disabilities are lacking something (Of course, as Alaniz shows, DC Comics actually retconned the Batgirl story line and changed the continuity and her origins by making her only temporarily disabled, which many saw as statement against those with disabilities, but that is an argument for another paper). Nevertheless, Barbara Gordon’s fictional story is a powerful portrayal of how one can find a new identity within disability. Not surprisingly, the story resonated with many fans (Alaniz, 2016; Duncan, 2020). The Batgirl story, at least for me, also points the way to creating a vision or dream to inspire people or at least to get them thinking about disability in new, more progressive ways, specifically the idea that people with disabilities are contributing members of society.

Queensbury (2020) asserts that disability is largely studied in two main genres: superhero comics and graphic memoirs. Queensbury (2020) examines the graphic

novel *The House that Groaned*, by Karrie Fransman and notes that it combines elements of both these genres. Like a superhero comic, it has elements of gross exaggeration, but like a memoir comic, it also depicts the “humdrum everyday experience” of disability (Queensbury, 2020, 67). My own short graphic narrative does something similar, it is more a memoir type comic, but has elements of superhero stories, or at least the Batgirl story noted above.

The creation of these types of dreams cannot be undertaken without consideration of the historical context of disability and comics. As such, it is important to note that Whalen, Foss and Gray (2016) point to some of the representations and depictions of disability that were present as far back as the turn of the century in the *Little Nemo* comics by Winsor McCay. Any new dream or story in regards to disability must take into account this fact, that disability has been part of comics (if many times problematically) for a long time. The representation of disability in superhero comics also has a long history. In 2014, the BBC published an article which specifically looked at the different examples of disability in superhero comics over the last half century (Hawkins, 2014). Hawkins (2014) notes that Dr. Mid-Nite of DC, who made his first appearance in 1941, is considered to be the first superhero with a disability. Through the years, many other superheroes with disabilities have appeared, including Daredevil (who is blind) and Professor Charles Xavier of the X-Men (who cannot walk) to name a few. Even Batman was disabled for a time. Preston (2016) examines some of the issues surrounding Batman’s healing process after Bane breaks his back. Preston (2016, p.155) notes how the depictions of Batman in this comic creates “a problematic and abbreviated narrative of healing.” The point here is to understand that disability in superhero and non-superhero comics is not a new phenomenon. This is important in any political discussion- events do not occur in a vacuum, all must have historical context. Disability has a definite history and that history is crucial as we continually reinterpret disability in a creative democracy.

The short sampling above demonstrates various representations of disability in different genres of comics over the course of the last century, as well as how many facets of the comics medium can be utilized to represent disability. The ideas above also laid the groundwork for the creation of my own comic to which we now turn.

The Graphic Narrative: *Creating Hope Where None Should Be*

The larger purpose of my short comic (**Figure 1**) is to create a story, a vision of what could be, something that resonates and makes people think about disability in new ways and how disabilities affect citizens in the republic. Following Duncombe (2019) I wanted to create something which utilized the power of symbol and story, but something which could also speak to more social and civic concerns.



Figure 1: *Creating Hope Where None Should Be*. This is the author's attempt to create a graphic narrative and use this narrative as a means of political expression.

Disability is an intensely personal thing but it is also a political question, and I wanted to create a piece which embodies those two ideas. So I turned to my own experience with my wife. My story is one page long, and it is composed of nine wordless panels. The page actually contains two smaller stories, one centered in the main character's memory, the other in real time. Panels one, three and five are a memory sequence, a memory of the main character, who suffers from an unspecified physical disability, has of her days as an athlete prior to her diagnosis. Panels two, four and six bring home the fact that our protagonist has a disability. Panel two introduces the disability by showing the protagonist hanging a handicapped parking placard in her car, with her daughter looking on. Her memory collapses into real time by panel seven, where we learn she is driving to a high school to hand in an application for head field hockey coach. By panel nine, which is borderless, we see a beaming face, age lines and all. The use of two or more simultaneous stories on a page is known as multilinearity which is a type of nonlinear relationship between panels (Cabero, 2019). This feature I think is especially powerful because we as citizens must constantly operate within multiple realms- in this case, the main character is operating in real time and in memory. Our memories, past experiences and identity are powerful things which inspire us to act in a variety of ways. As such, memory has a powerful effect on how we operate as citizens. Memories define who we are. From my experiences with my wife, I know that her memories of her playing days are important as she navigates her disability. I also know that her memories can be painful reminders. Even for nondisabled people whose bodies can no longer perform, memories can tie them back to the sports and activities they loved. In short, and recalling the earlier examination of Dolmage and Jacobs (2016) and Koch (2016), memories and simultaneous stories might be important consideration when creating stories and visions of disability.

As noted earlier, the story is not meant to be overly optimistic because the protagonist still has to deal with very real limitations, such as handicapped parking and walking with a cane. What is important is the fact that her disability was a chance for growth and change, it presumably allowed her to explore a new aspect of athletics-coaching. I chose to make the last panel a borderless panel because the border acts

as a limiting device through the story, or at the very least it creates ordered segments of time and a normal flow of time (Duncan et al., 2015). Whereas her face bursting out of the border, uncontainable by a border, may imply that she has broken with the norm, in this case the societal limits placed on her by a disability. The absence of a panel, in contrast to eight other bordered panels, is a way to utilize the page for this purpose (Cohn, 2009). Further, I tried to portray the character in lifelike way, perhaps in a sense which “humanizes” her (Gay, 2016, 181).

The implication of the short narrative I created is that the character has grown. It made her realize potential she did not know she had. In this case, disability may be another step in one’s growth and natural lifelong transformation, and one’s growth as a citizen. This notion of growth for people with disabilities, as well as how non-disabled people see them, should be situated in an evolving notion of citizenship and the republic more generally as well. As noted above, Alaniz (2016, 63) asserted that the Barbara Gordon demonstrates the “post-ADA vision of the disabled subject” where people with disabilities are contributing members of society. My short graphic piece tries to capture this sentiment as well, but in the comics form.

Comics as Creative Democracy

From my own experiences I have found that comics in the classroom and as scholarly pursuits can be practical endeavors. What I mean by this statement is that comics, which I have likened to the creation of dreams and new truths (Duncombe, 2019), and the creation of a new world (Duncombe and Lambert, 2018), can help to start conversations on difficult or sensitive topics in ways that traditional academic scholarship might not be able to accomplish. In the widest sense, and in line with the three facets of citizenship I argued for earlier, it is my hope that these conversations and discussions can be one way to continually create and re-create democracy, especially with an eye toward diverse populations and the pursuit of justice. Below are some examples of my own experience to demonstrate how the use of a faculty created comic might achieve this task. I presented the comic above at a conference, the Conference for Higher Education Pedagogy in February in 2019. I detail two important interactions the comic inspired.

One of the members of the audience commented how the stairs in the eighth panel created yet another obstacle for the protagonist as well as the lack of handicapped accessible entrances in the building. I drew the stairs not even thinking about this, I drew them simply as part of the story- as an able-bodied man I did not really take the stairs into account, but this woman, who was a disability scholar, invested the image with meaning I did not intend.

I used the comic I created as an example. I showed the participants in the audience. Next, I had the participants in the audience utilize the comics medium to convey some of their own ideas. The participants could draw on whatever topic they wanted, but one participant, presumably because of my example, sketched a comic of her families' experience with disability prior to the passage of many of the federal policies and accommodations. The participant's sister suffered from a disability in an age when there were little accommodations or policies or even recognition of disability. She presented the comic to the session, and everyone was taken back and it generated a great discussion. The audience actually got to see and feel the pain that was represented in the comic. My comic had started a conversation which she then added to and enriched.

These are some examples from my own experiences, but I think these are the types of discussions that comics in the classroom and scholarship arena can help to facilitate. I believe these anecdotes are illustrative of how comics, and art in general, can help open up new conversations. In the widest sense, my comic was a beginning, an opening to more insights. Comics, symbols and art in general are mutable and usually do not convey one specific meaning (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Duncan, 2012; Duncombe & Lambert, 2018; Gill & Agnostini, 2018). This mutability I think is the key because it helps engender various interpretations which leads to important conversations and insights as the notion of disability, in comics and in general. This is not to say this cannot occur with traditional research, but I think comics are especially fruitful for this task.

I see these discussions as foundational to citizenship as well, especially with regard to the definition discussed earlier which centers on vulnerable populations

and creative democracy. While I cannot say definitively if any of the participants left the room with a new enlightened consciousness regarding disability, I know that I did. My views of disability evolved and I believe that the comics medium helped to engender that evolution in new ways. Of course, even my own short comic should not be immune from criticism. My comic needs to seriously be discussed and criticized and from that discussion new understandings can emerge.

Of course not everyone will get to present comics at a conference. Nevertheless, faculty created comics can be submitted to journals (such as this one) and posted online. Further, faculty could have their students create comics as well, all in an effort to generate richer discussions. (In almost every course I teach, I have students drawing comics). I also realize that many faculty might not be artists, but I would encourage faculty to consider the comics medium to convey their ideas and to partner with an artist to accomplish this task. For an example, see Getz and Clarke's (2016) *Abina and the Important Men: A Graphic History*. For this piece, a historian partnered with an artist to bring to life a court case during European colonialism in Africa. For my part, I wanted to capture how memories and emotions are part of our politics and drive us to act, so I created a comic. Symbols and images (such as the handicapped placard and the stairs) also become powerful components which evoke interpretations and facilitate dialogue on this most important topic. I think the comics medium is adept at showing all of these elements and can be used to create new visions of the future.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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