

## It's Okay to Stare: Visual and Unseen Disabilities in Comic Book Super Heroes

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**Abstract:** Since their inception in the 1930s, comic books and graphic novels featuring superheroes have reflected innumerable elements of science fiction, from space travel to technological human augmentation. Similar to other works of science fiction, and all literature in general, disabled characters are either underrepresented or misrepresented. In comic books and graphic novels, disabled characters tend to be villains whose disabilities and deformities represent their inner ugliness and evilness, or they are pathetic background characters meant to be saved by the able-bodied hero. Most research conducted on the topic of representations of disabilities in comic books focuses on the same five heroes and a slew of villains and side characters, often analyzing only the most “visible” disabilities.

This article builds on the theories of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Leonard Davis, and others to evaluate representations of disabilities in comic book heroes. Then, it challenges existing theories of disabilities in comic books as proposed by José Alaniz, by broadening the scope of disability studies as they apply to comic books and graphic novels. Next, it demonstrates the problematic nature of disabled superheroes being “cured” or “fixed”, suggesting that heroes cannot be both disabled and heroic (in a traditional sense). Finally, it expounds on the different ways writers and artists treat heroes with “visible” disabilities such as paraplegia or blindness versus “unseen” disabilities such as deafness and substance addiction.

**Keywords:** disabilities studies, cure, superhero, visible disabilities, invisible disabilities, freak shows

In June 1923, Jor-El stood in his laboratory as his home planet Krypton quaked and collapsed all around him. In his arms, he held his only child Kal-El, a son whom he would not allow to die with Krypton. He placed Kal-El in a spacecraft and launched it on a trajectory toward Earth, where Kal-El would discover incredible powers and grow up to be Earth's greatest champion: Superman.

Superman—and just about every other Golden Age comic book hero—represents classic Greco-Roman ideals of beauty and athleticism. They are handsome, intelligent, strong, and courageous. Even their most prominent female Golden Age counterpart, Wonder Woman, demonstrates beauty, strength, and cunning. Children read about these heroes, seeing in them everything they wanted to be. Maybe these children couldn't shoot lasers out of their eyes or create a car that transformed into a boat, but they could hone their brains in school and play sports to become physically fit. It took years before the image of the disabled hero would become more prevalent,

ushering in the Silver Age of comic books. Thus, disability studies in comic books predominantly tend to focus on characters from the Silver Age to the present. *Death, Disability, and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond* by José Alaniz (2014), perhaps the preeminent study on disabilities in comic books, illustrates this point. More recently, the collection *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives* also focuses almost entirely on portrayals of disability from the Silver Age to modern manga. Whereas these texts and similar articles on the topic of disability in comic books and graphic novels do provide insight into and make irrefutable contributions to the field, they too are limited in their perspectives on disability. And although supporters of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) have expanded their understandings of which impairments constitute disabilities, much of the research on comic books and disabilities seems a bit dated in this regard.

This article contributes to existing scholarship by expanding the ways in which disability studies can

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be applied to comic book super heroes. Primarily, it shows the influence of circus freak shows on both comic books and disabilities studies to demonstrate how the former was inspired by the incredible feats of the performers, and how the latter was inspired by the contextualized spectacle of disabled bodies. Then, it provides an overview of the most common comic book characters mentioned in disability studies as evidence that the scope of disabled superheroes in comic books is myopic and limited despite the availability of numerous unstudied superheroes. Next, it explains how comic book artists and writers portray visible disabilities in superheroes, and shows how these visible disabilities have become the crux of disability studies in comic books. Doing so is problematic insofar as this over-emphasis on visible disabilities obscures and overwhelmingly eclipses critical consideration of invisible disabilities. Finally, it presents comic book superheroes who have been overlooked in disability studies because their disabilities are predominately invisible. Analyzing these overlooked characters emphasizes the need for scholars to expand their narrow focus by transcending the visible, physical disabilities most commonly studied. Recognizing portrayals of invisible disabilities in comic books will not only shine a light on unseen (and unrecognized) portrayals of disabilities in the medium, but may also open the door for continuing scholarship on unseen disabilities more broadly.

### Origin Stories and the Circus

Both comic book authors and scholars of disabilities studies have found inspiration in different aspects of late-19th-Century/early-20th-Century freak shows. On one hand, comic book authors were infatuated with the daring performers of the freak shows. Authors such as Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster modeled Superman after the sideshow strongman in both feats and costume (Roberson, 2017). In the original stories of Superman, the hero could not fly or freeze people with his breath. Instead, he demonstrated superhuman feats of strength, speed, and general athleticism. Later characters

such as Robin (Dick Grayson), Deadman, Hawkeye, and Mister Miracle were all circus performers before they became superheroes as well. Both Robin and Deadman were acrobats whose death-defying trapeze acts led to tragedy; Hawkeye was a circus sharp-shooter; and Mister Miracle was an escape artist.

On the other hand, disability scholars were inspired to humanize and normalize images of side-show “freaks” who had been advertised to defy nature and horrify onlookers. Historically, these “freaks” were placed on display to inspire curiosity and fear, promoted by circus barkers who presented the disabled as alien or inhuman, exotic, and sometimes threatening. Theorists such as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, in her book *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Disability in American Culture and Literature*, analyze representations of freak show attractions who (dissimilar to the heroically portrayed strongman, acrobats, sharp-shooters, etc.) were born with what were considered to be deformities or abnormalities. In this work, Garland-Thomson examines how freak shows showcased disabled individuals and put them on display: “The century-long heyday of American freak shows represented the dramatic resurgence of the tradition of publicly displaying and reading extraordinary bodies” (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p.58). The display of abnormal figures was intended to create an uneasiness in the crowd of onlookers by shocking them with bodies they were not used to seeing. Garland-Thomson accordingly notes that “Scrupulously described, interpreted, and displayed, the bodies of the severely congenitally disabled have always functioned as icons upon which people discharge their anxieties, convictions, and fantasies” (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p.56). From Garland-Thomson’s description, one can imagine a connection not only between performers and artists, but also between freak show audiences and comic book readers. Both audiences and readers are given fantastical descriptions of extraordinary individuals. One account from the freak show

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display, fished out of the ocean by sailors and rumored to be a part of the lost City of Atlantis. Its comic book equivalent may describe a man—born of an Atlantian queen and human father—who can breathe under water and command sea life. Upon watching these individuals, the audience/reader is invited to embark on a journey to a fantasy world where they can feel fear, pity, and courage—whether inspired by a circus barker's description of a "sideshow" or by imagining the world narrated in the comic book panels. Both scenarios attempt to appeal to the viewer's curiosity about "abnormal" bodies and incredible feats.

Whether performed or illustrated, then, each of these experiences creates a spectacle at which the reader or viewer is encouraged to stare; there is, however, a distinct difference between one's staring at a living human being and staring at their graphic representation. As Garland-Thomson points out in her article, "The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography," "By intensely looking toward the physical signifier for disability, staring creates an awkward partnership that estranges and discomforts both the viewer and the viewed" (Garland-Thomson, 2002, pp.56-7). In essence, staring at another individual, no matter how dehumanized they may be in broader society, can elicit a sense of guilt or shame in the spectator. Such emotions prohibit the spectator from analyzing the spectacle entirely or for too long because of a sense that it is "wrong," an admirable sensibility in the larger view of disability. Comic book readers, however, can stare as long as they want because the characters on the pages are fictional and cannot see them. By the late 19th Century, the invention of the camera made it possible for spectators to gaze at freak show attractions without fear, guilt, or shame.

The advent of the camera eliminated the personal relationship between the spectator and the spectacle, allowing the observer to view a photograph with the same impunity as the reader of a comic book. By doing so, a spectacle such as the freak

show becomes devoid of any lingering humanity, essentially reduced to a flat, one-dimensional image on paper which allows for detached consumption. The spectator sees both as fictional creatures rather than as living human beings. In "A Means of Surveillance: The Photograph as Evidence in Law," John Tagg refers to the photograph as the "unreturnable gaze" (Tagg, 1993, p.64). In other words, the photograph provides its viewers with the opportunity to stare as long as they like without feeling the need to respect the social mores which dictate the appropriate parameters of the gaze. This prolonged gaze allows onlookers to analyze, scrutinize, and evaluate an image of a person just as they would the cover of a comic book. Comic books, though, contain more than a picturesque cover; they also contain pages of panels, each one depicting the actions, interactions, conversations, and thoughts of its characters alongside descriptive narration. Thus, comic books offer more than a prolonged gaze. They offer a complete portrayal of the characters. Such an insight allows scholars not only to apply theories of disability to the pages superficially, as Garland-Thomson and Tagg do with photographs, but also to apply them to analysis of the characters whose disabilities are not visible.

### The Usual, Visibly Disabled Suspects

In comic book artwork, visible disabilities are, unsurprisingly, the easiest to portray. Characters with visible disabilities are depicted with either non-normative physical appearances or equipment signifying their disabilities. Thus, the reader has a constant visual reminder of their disabilities. For example, a quick Internet search of comic book characters with disabilities yields numerous results naming the same set of figures: Captain Marvel Jr., Thor, Professor Xavier/ the Chief, Daredevil, Oracle, Cyborg, Iron Man, and Hawkeye. All but one of these characters have some form of visible disability. Both Captain Marvel Jr. and Thor's human form, Donald Blake, walk with a crutch or cane (at least originally), while Professor Xavier, the Chief, and Oracle required a wheelchair.<sup>1</sup> As Matt Murdock,

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Daredevil wears dark sunglasses and walks with a white cane to “perform” his blindness. Both Cyborg and Iron Man have futuristic upgrades from which they cannot detach themselves, whether it is Cyborg’s 75% robotic body or Iron Man’s hi-tech pace-maker with nigh-unlimited power output. The only character on this list who does not have a visible disability is Hawkeye, and this invisible disability has caused many inaccuracies in his story.<sup>2</sup> Primarily, many comic book authors forget that he is deaf because he, like most deaf individuals, has no visible markers denoting his deafness. For instance, although it has been established that he reads lips, he has responded to people speaking behind him as would a hearing individual. This article will return to the question of Hawkeye’s representation later, as he does not represent the typical visibly disabled superhero.

When the most prominent disabled superheroes are visually disabled, authors and artists often portray them in stereotypical ways, many of which are condescending or offensive to the disabled community. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson identifies four visually recurring representations of people with disabilities in popular media such as television, internet, and press, and these representations are mirrored in comic books as well. According to Garland-Thomson, representations of people with disabilities fall into the following categories: as the wondrous, the sentimental, the realistic, and the exotic (Garland-Thomson, p.58). The wondrous “capitalizes on the physical differences in order to elicit amazement and admiration” (Garland-Thomson, p.59). The sentimental “produces the sympathetic victim or helpless sufferer needing protection or succor...” (Garland-Thomson, 2002, p.63). The exotic “presents disabled figures as alien, distant, often sensationalized, eroticized or entertaining in their difference” (Garland-Thomson, 2002, p.67). And the realistic “trades verisimilitude, regularizing the disabled figure in order to avoid differentiation and arouse identification, often normalizing and sometimes minimizing the visual mark of disability” (Garland-Thomson, 2002, p.69). Keeping in mind that

comic book superheroes are the focus of this work, it is unsurprising that the wondrous and exotic are often associated with disabled comic book heroes (arguably erroneously) while sentimental and realistic depictions of disabled characters are few and far between; when they do appear, it is in such a hyperbolized way as to produce somewhat of a comedic effect.

### The Wondrous

In comic books, heroes are intended to be larger than life and demonstrate attributes and skills that surpass those of the average person. Because of these attributes, all comic book heroes (regardless of ability) have some wondrous elements. As such, disabled superheroes are not wondrous because of their disability; they are wondrous because of their superhuman abilities. This superhuman representation of a disabled character is more concurrent with modern portrayals of the wondrous: the supercrip. According to Garland-Thomson, the “supercrip” is a disabled person whose actions seem to surmount his or her disability (Garland-Thomson, 2002, p.61). A real-life example of the supercrip mythology is Crossfit competitor Kevin Ogar, who, after sustaining an injury in competition that rendered him unable to move his legs, continued to train, releasing videos of himself performing feats of strength such as climbing a rope with his wheelchair (Ogar, 2015). The supercrip inspires awe by transcending people’s expectations of a person’s disability and by frequently surpassing the capacities of the “average,” able-bodied person.

On the surface, the wondrous representation of disability and the supercrip archetype seem to align perfectly with representations of disabled comic book heroes. Upon further examination, however, we see that disabled superheroes in comic books often exaggerate the magnitude of their disability to hide their extraordinary abilities. Whereas supercrips transcend people’s expectations in ways that seems to undermine their disabilities, disabled comic book superheroes often “play up” their disabilities to hide their actual super powers. For



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example, Matt Murdock wears sunglasses and walks with a white cane to show the public that he is a typical blind person. This façade hides the fact that he actually maneuvers using a bat-like radar that allows him to see three-dimensionally. José Alaniz recognizes the problematic nature of the notion of the supercrip and the superhero, calling it a “pitiful identity [which turns] into a new ‘super-persona’ that defies pity” (Alaniz, 2014, p.33). Subsequently, Alaniz does support, at least in part, the notion that comic books do represent supercrips. He analyzes characters such as Iron Man, Thor, Daredevil, and Doctor Strange, all of whom have some visible disability. Then, he demonstrates how their “super-persona” negates their disability altogether by allowing them access to extraordinary abilities, from Iron Man’s super armor to Doctor Strange’s mastery of sorcery. The end result, he implies, is that these disabled characters transcend the wondrous—or even the supercrip—and, even in their “disabled” form are unable to be identified as disabled. Their superhumanity is meant to signify that they have effectively “overcome” their disabilities. Alaniz raises an interesting point here, but ignores the fact that these superheroes are still disabled, whether visibly or invisibly. Although they do have super powers that provide them abilities beyond those of the average, able-bodied person, Matt Murdock is blind and Dr. Strange is incapable of performing surgery. As such, they must still be identified as disabled. Although their super powers may compensate for their disabilities, the disabilities themselves are not negated or cured.<sup>3</sup>

### The Sentimental

Just as the portrayal of the wondrous disabled figure is difficult to accurately identify in comic books, so too are portrayals of the sentimental. Typically, the sentimental represents people in situations where they are to be pitied for their disabilities. The nature of the comic book superhero, however, is to persevere with strength and courage, negating any pity the reader may have felt. Perhaps Ben Grimm provides the best—if not oldest—example of a sen-

timental portrayal that fails to maintain pity for the character in question. Grimm’s origin story shows that he is a test pilot for and friend of the scientist Reed Richards and his family, Sue and Johnny. While piloting a mission through space, Ben, Reed, Sue, and Johnny are bathed in cosmic rays that imbue them all with super powers. For Grimm, the rays transform him into a hulking mass of humanoid rock, and he is dubbed “The Thing.” His superhero name alone suggests that Ben Grimm has lost his humanity and should be pitied.

The Thing’s new form renders him incapable of functioning normally in society. In these stories, the sentimental depiction of the Thing suggests to the reader that disabilities and deformities are comical. In addition to his “freakish” appearance, he has only four blocky, oversized fingers and a massive body; moreover, he weighs far more than an average human. He often struggles to fit through doors, breaks furniture, and fumbles to pick up glassware. He is also susceptible to depression and fits of anger because of his condition. After breaking a table or smashing the threshold of a door through which he is trying to walk, he often pouts while his friend, Johnny, laughs hysterically. Johnny, himself, often plays practical jokes on the Thing, which result in the Thing chasing Johnny. The way these scenes are portrayed suggests that the jokes played on the Thing are light-hearted and jovial. Not only do these portrayals suggest that it is okay to laugh at deformities and disabilities, but also that it is acceptable to play pranks on and poke fun at people with reference to their disabling impairments.

In analyzing the Thing and the scenarios in which he is placed, the problematic nature of depicting disabilities sentimentally is made manifest. Is the reader supposed to pity him for being unable to function in a society that is too small for him? Is the reader supposed to laugh at him for fumbling and being the brunt of slapstick jokes? Or is the reader supposed to cheer as he capitalizes on his strength and endurance to save people who would otherwise run from him in fear?<sup>4</sup> Treatments of the Thing

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seem to suggest all of these, and none of them are positive responses to disabled figures.

Authors have ascribed a similarly comedic portrayal of the sentimental to Hawkeye. Although Hawkeye's disability is occasionally portrayed realistically, he nonetheless sometimes falls a victim to a similar comedic fate as the Thing. Such is the case in *Faction* and Aja's Hawkeye series. In their story, Hawkeye loses his hearing after being stabbed in the ears.<sup>5</sup> In addition to producing a quasi-silent issue (#19) that illustrates Hawkeye's deafness and demonstrates that he and his brother are fluent in sign language, *Faction* and Aja released Issue 11—what has come to be known in the comic book community as “The Pizza Dog Issue.” In Issue 11, previous issues of the series are shown through the eyes and ears of Hawkeye's dog, Lucky the Pizza Dog. Issue 11 plays on the misconception that deaf people cannot hear at all. In this issue, Hawkeye's deafness is likened to what a dog understands. At this point in the story, Hawkeye's personal life is a mess, and he has three different women frustrated with him. As Lucky watches Hawkeye's conversations with these women, he only picks up a few words. Many of these words, such as “bad,” “leave,” and “goodbye,” the reader can imagine are being yelled at Hawkeye; thus, he would be more likely to actually hear them, provided his hearing loss is not profound. The problem here is that much of the series is written with comedic undertones. As Hawkeye's personal life gets worse, the reader is conditioned to laugh at the mistakes he makes with what he does and says, unable to get out of his own way. These undertones throughout the comic also make light of his deafness as just one more thing in his life that is going wrong in some Charlie Brown-esque fashion... not that this depiction is unique to representations of disabled superheroes.

Many comic book heroes are fumbling or comedic, particularly when occupying the form(s) of their alter egos, whether it is Clark Kent (Superman) stumbling through a door, Barry Allen (the

Flash) running late, or Peter Parker (Spider-Man) being picked on for being weak. The irony in these characters is that Superman is super agile, the Flash is super fast, and Spider-Man is super strong. Despite their nerdy personas, each one—even in their alter-ego—is fully abled. When contrasted to superheroes such as the Thing, whose rock form is incapable of turning human, or Hawkeye, who is still deaf when he is a hero, Superman, Flash, and Spider-Man are not pitiable. They are humorous when they stumble and fall simply because the reader knows that they are performing clumsiness and ineptness to maintain their secret. The humor is suddenly lost on a disabled superhero who cannot control his actions. Readers are then contextualized by the panels to respond one of two ways based on the tone of the scene. One, they can laugh, or two, they can pity the character. Either response reflects why the sentimental portrayal of disabled comic book characters can often do more harm than good.

### The Exotic

Exotic representations are omnipresent in comic books; however, they are usually applied to villains to equate disfigurement with evil and corruption of the soul, dating back to the conventions of gothic literature (Alaniz, 2014, p.56). The list of disabled and/or disfigured comic book villains is endless: Dr. Doom, Dr. Oolong, Dr. Psycho, Dr. Connors, Dr. Langstrom, Dr. Fries (and that is not even all of the disabled or disfigured villains with Ph.D.'s). Most of these characters demonstrate their exoticism either by coming from strange, faraway lands or by anthropomorphizing themselves into humanoid bats or lizards. One has a difficult time, however, finding such a plethora of exotic representations of disabled superheroes in comic books.<sup>6</sup> Certainly, two of the X-Men fit this mold: Angel and Beast.

Both Angel and Beast are original members of the *Uncanny X-Men* (1963), although their deformities are portrayed differently. Angel was originally a teenage boy who grew giant wings that allowed him to fly like a bird. Beast was originally a large

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man with almost ape-like hands and feet. Despite his wings, Angel has always been portrayed as beautiful, and even though he sometimes resents his wings as an obvious sign of being a mutant, he loves flying more than anything else. Angel's beautiful and angelic representation on the page "eroticizes" his disfigurement. When his wings are hidden, he is often viewed amorously by people on the street.<sup>7</sup> To add to his erotic and exotic image, Angel is a billionaire who drives expensive cars and owns properties all over the world, epitomizing classic images of the rich playboy. Contrarily, Beast has been a contradiction since his creation. He is a brilliant scientist in a hulking body with big hands and feet. Even though his "mutation" is not as dramatically visible as Angel's, he is readily cognizant of his deformity, which worries him so much that he creates a serum to "cure" himself. Instead of being cured however, he mutates further, growing sharp teeth and blue fur. Thus, he becomes (and comes to see himself as) completely savage and physically grotesque. As if to suggest that his further disfigurement is "ugly," Marvel Comics created a mini-series called *Beauty and the Beast* (1984) that tells the tale of the romance between Beast and another mutant, Dazzler, who is an attractive singer. The story seems to suggest that the only person who can see past Beast's disfigured appearance is another mutant. Incidents throughout the comic, however, suggest that Dazzler—who has no visible disabilities or disfigurements—does not like the attention she receives being with Beast. In one such incident, she runs from him on the beach because she does not like the crowd gathering around them. As if to promote the idea of Beast as a savage, the series shows an incident where Beast is injected with a serum that accelerates his mutation. This serum also effects his personality, which will align itself with his mutation. Beast, whose personality is defined time and again in the comic books by his intelligence and logic, becomes a bloodthirsty monster who tries to kill the woman whom he loves. Dissimilar to Angel, who is eroticized in his exotic portrayal, Beast is resigned to being a

spectacle that is too savage looking to be loved romantically. As if to drive the point home, Beast tries to kill Dazzler in a theater setting designed by a ring leader who makes spectacles of disfigured mutants. Although the creative team is aware that they have created a comic book freak show, their treatment of the characters (not only Beast) seems to reinforce the savage nature of disabled people, suggesting that they are easily persuaded, violent, and unpredictable.

In the X-Men Universe of Marvel Comics, the Morlocks also seem to epitomize the exotic representation of disability. Some portrayed as heroes and others as villains, the Morlocks en masse are an ostracized group of mutants who live in the sewer beneath New York City because most of them are too physically deformed or disabled to pass as humans.<sup>8</sup> Many of them, such as the leader Callisto and her protégé Marrow, show such contempt for humans that they embody the exotic savage—too dangerous to fit into society. Their dwelling beneath New York City reinforces their exotic nature as they are alien to and distant from "civilized" society. Similar to the mutants in the *Beauty and the Beast* series, most of the Morlocks are portrayed as volatile people whose aggression represents a threat to humanity and mutants alike.

All of the aforementioned examples come from the X-Men Universe, a comic that was inspired by the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Despite its roots in advocacy however, it often falls victim to common tropes defining disabilities as well. The characters mentioned in this section are all "mutants," and in the context of the stories, the word "mutant" is synonymous with super powers and wild adventures. For some like Angel, his mutation draws negative attention from some but inspires awe and lust from others. For characters like Beast and the Morlocks, disabilities and deformities evoke images of the savage and unwashed. The end results are images of the exotic who are too far removed from "polite society" to be trusted or accepted. Such a portrayal is no different than a

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disabled person being put in a cage as the circus barker warns the audience not to get too close lest they risk being mauled.

### The Realistic

Finding realistic representations of disabilities is difficult because of the unrealistic nature of superheroes in comic books. The most that one can hope for is to see an extraordinary person with a disability that is portrayed in such a way as to maintain some sense of verisimilitude. However, realistic portrayals of disabilities in comic books rarely follow a social model, but rely heavily on a medical model. The social model sees disability as a societal construct created by how society is organized. The focus of such a model is to remove barriers so that people with disabilities can achieve independence. The medical model sees disabilities as a set of problems to be fixed, even if the disability is not causing pain or debilitating effects. The latter is troublesome in that it frames disabled individuals as being problems in society rather than a part of a society that is not designed with them in mind. Too often in comic books, writers, and artists use the medical model to portray disabled superheroes, even if these characters function perfectly well as superheroes with their disabilities.

The most shining example of this realistic representation gone awry under the medical model is the character Barbara Gordon (Batgirl). Barbara Gordon's early appearances in the Batman series show her as the mild-mannered daughter of Commissioner Gordon by day and the plucky crime-fighting Batgirl by night. As a heroine, she seems very similar to Robin in her light-hearted, jovial approach to crime fighting—seemingly unremarkable from every other teenage sidekick in DC Comics. This hackneyed characterization changed in Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke* (1988).

In *The Killing Joke*, The Joker shoots Barbara Gordon in her stomach, shattering her L1 vertebra. Although the comic was supposed to be a one-shot (no pun intended) in an alternate universe, fans re-

sponded so well to the story that DC made it a part of its regular continuity. Primarily, Gordon struggles with her disability, but soon realizes that her “photographic memory”<sup>9</sup> and technological intelligence make her a computer whiz, rivaling even the best Justice Leaguers. First as the intelligence expert in *The Birds of Prey* and then as the technological backbone of the Justice League, Gordon dons the name “Oracle.” Her abilities as a computer whiz become central to her character, rather than her disability, which seemingly fades into the background as just another part of her person. This, of course, was a positive step in the representation of disabilities in comic books. As Lennard Davis contends in his article “The End of Identity Politics: On Disability as an Unstable Category,” “The first wave of any struggle involves the establishment of the identity against the societal definitions that were formed largely by oppression. In this first phase, the identity...is hypostasized, normalized, turned positive against the negative descriptions used by those oppressive regimes” (Davis, 2010, p.301). In the case of Oracle, her presence as a hero is normalized. Despite her disability, she is viewed by the characters and the readers as a powerful hero who is paralyzed rather than as a hero defined exclusively by her (dis)ability. The Justice League relies on her to hack computers, to disarm security systems, and to operate satellites, among other things. In short, she becomes the backbone of the Justice League.

For over twenty years, Barbara Gordon remained a positive portrayal of a disabled superhero, but a retcon by DC in 2011 problematized this portrayal.<sup>10</sup> *Batgirl #1* shows Barbara Gordon jumping (literally) back into crime-fighting in her Batgirl outfit. Further issues explain that she is given the ability to walk by a cybernetic implant that restored the nerves in her back. An article from *The Guardian*, “Batgirl Back on her Feet after 23 Years in DC Comics Reboot,” aptly discusses the initial fan outrage to the running, ducking, jumping Batgirl. Beneath the title is the caption, “Fans lament end of paraplegic storyline as DC Comics announces all 52 of its series



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are to revert to issue number one" (The Guardian, 2011). The article shows how unnecessary the retcon actually was, but even more disturbing is the response of Batgirl retcon writer Gail Simone—a well-known civil and women's rights supporter in the comic book industry. She states, "She's been removed from the action and danger for a long time. With this relaunch, she is still very much Barbara but she can reclaim part of her history and legacy with modern stories" (The Guardian, 2011). Simone's response seems to disregard the "history and legacy" of Oracle for the previous 23 years, one that normalized Gordon's disability and promoted her as a hero for being heroic, not heroic in spite of her disability. Simone's declaration that she will be placed back in the "action" dismisses the fact that she was a major part of the "action" as Oracle and perpetuates a false dichotomy between utility and ability.

As if she knew that controversy would surround Barbara Gordon's retcon, Simone made great efforts to disable Gordon in another way: paralyzing her with Acute Traumatic Disorder.<sup>11</sup> In the first issue of Batgirl (the New 52), Barbara describes her mental state after being shot: "Brave Barbara Gordon, victim of a brutal home invasion three years ago...Brave, brave Barbara Gordon. I panicked every time I heard a doorbell for months after" (Simone, 2013, vol. 1). By the next issue she sees a gun pointed at her abdomen and narrates, "The gun. It's...It's pointed right...right at the same... (spot the Joker shot me). He's going to shoot me. I can't. I can't. I froze. He pointed the gun at me and I froze" (Simone, 2013, vol. 2). In these panels, Gordon expresses that her Acute Stress Disorder is triggered when she is reminded of being shot. In following issues, Simone once again shows her awareness that Gordon's "cured" disability is controversial as she has the hero express guilt for being able to walk when so many other people are still disabled. Gordon asks herself, "Why do you get the miracle when so many others never will?" It suggests that Gordon should feel guilty because she was freed of her "pathetic" state as a disabled person. In es-

sence, Simone takes a strong, normalized hero with a physical disability and replaces her with a more timid, ineffective hero who, afflicted with a form of Acute Stress Disorder, struggles to manifest the bravery required for handling the dangers of crime-fighting. This exchange, however, does not remove the sting of "curing" what had been, up until this point, a wonderful portrayal of a realistic disabled character. The transfer from a physical disability to a mental disability suggests that Simone feels justified in her decision so long as she can still claim that Gordon is disabled. Such an approach risks reducing all disabilities in comic books to interchangeable narrative props.

If Barbara Gordon's miraculous recovery were an isolated incident, then it would not seem so important, but the attempt to cure disabled superheroes is omnipresent across the genre, and evokes the specter of disability as disease. Gordon is just the most well-developed and popularized character to be cured. For example, Professor Xavier has used science, technology, and even his telepathic powers a few times to restore his ability to walk. He has used a serum as well as Shi'ar (alien) technology, and he has even possessed Phantomex, a mutant who can walk. The mutant Karma, immobilized by morbid obesity, is placed in a desert in another realm and emerges slender and fit with no explanation other than that she found a friend who trusted her.<sup>12</sup> Literally, in one panel she is obese, and the next time she is visible a few panels later, she is slender. The X-Man Angel has his wings amputated, only to appear a few issues later with new, more powerful metal wings that hurl indestructible, poisonous metal feathers. Adam Strange is blinded by a zeta beam malfunction only to have his sight returned on Rann when his wife uses the planet's futuristic technology to imbue him with a pair of functional, cloned eyes. Even Batman has his back broken by the luchador-inspired, super-steroid fueled Bane, only to miraculously heal himself so that he can protect Gotham once again. In most of these cases, the cure is met with fan approval. Despite Karma having emotional issues that lead her to

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binge eating and obesity, fans celebrated the return of the lean, fit Vietnamese teenager whom they originally saw in her first appearance in the *New Mutants* graphic novel. Always having had the weakest powers of the original X-Men, Angel's new look is ominous and powerful; he becomes intimidating and fans celebrated the makeover. Even though Adam Strange struggles with blindness as he tries to fix his spaceship throughout the 52 series (2006-2007), his disability is merely a temporary obstacle for the hero to overcome, no different than a broken limb. Batman's broken back story hovers dangerously close to the image of the wondrous supercrip and the "overcoming narrative."<sup>13</sup>

For the able reader, these stories portray disabilities as temporary and "fixable." They convey the message that heroes overcome disabilities by curing them or cybernetically enhancing themselves or even willing their disabilities away. Ella R. Browning shows the problematic portrayal of this "medical" approach to disability: "The medical model of disability, historically, has been consistent with the ways that our society (de)values individuals with disabilities. The medical model of disability understands disability as something wrong with the body, something abnormal, something tragic, something that needs to be fixed" (Browning, 2014, p.98). This "fix" runs the risk of actually modifying a respected disabled character such as Barbara Gordon. For disabled readers, the message can be even more damaging: it tells them that they need to be "fixed" and seems to suggest that those who do not cure themselves are weak or somehow less valuable.

### The Unseen Disability

As previously noted, comic books provide the reader with the chance to do more than gaze at images of characters. They function to make the characters' thoughts, lives, and conversations accessible. Thus far, this article has discussed the most commonly represented (and noted) disabled comic book superheroes, primarily because all of the aforementioned characters have visible disabilities. One needs to look no further than popu-

lar scholarship to understand the importance that scholars place on visible disabilities. For example, the works of Garland-Thomson focus predominately on photographs, videos, and advertisements, while the work of Elizabeth F. Emens states that these visible disabilities are "popular," and in "Constructing Normalcy," Leonard J. Davis affirms that ideas of "normalcy" are rooted in opinions of the physical form (Davis, 2010, p.4). However, in *Bending Over Backward: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions*, Davis refutes the notion of disabilities as purely physical phenomena, stating, "the body is never a single physical thing so much as a series of attitudes to it" (quoted in Alaniz, 2014, p.15). In this quote, Davis explains that disability is rooted as much in perception as it is in physicality. These perceptions in large are derived from the values and opinions of the society viewing the disabled. In essence, society plays a major role in determining what disability is, and this perception includes disabilities that are not physical or visible.

The 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) recognizes equal significance between mental, emotional, and physical disabilities. Still, scholarship about superheroes with invisible disabilities is scarce, despite the fact that comic books provide the perfect medium to study portrayals of superheroes with both visible and invisible disabilities. Despite their scarcity, some of the stories that reveal characters with invisible disabilities have become increasingly popular in their respective universes. Thus, this section expands existing scholarship to include portrayals of comic book superheroes with invisible disabilities. Such representations depict the multiple and overlapping sites of disability and attempt to acknowledge the distance between disabled experiences and performances of disability.

The challenge that comic book writers and artists face is how to portray characters with invisible disabilities through a medium that is predominately visual. Typically, they take one of two approaches: hyperbolize the invisible disabilities with stereotypical visual markers or attempt to portray them real-

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-istically. The most prominent example of the former approach is the character Legion.<sup>14</sup> Legion is often a villain or anti-hero (depending on the story), and his character is typically drawn with hair standing straight up, wide eyes, and a creepy smile—visual markers of a stereotypical, hyperbolized “lunatic.”<sup>15</sup> To add to the affect, artists often draw Legion with his head cocked to the side at an almost physically impossible ninety-degree angle. Moreover, he is often put in clothes that are either baggy and unkempt or hospital-issued, which mark him as an outcast from “civilized” society. His clothing suggests that he has escaped from a psych ward or that he lives on the streets (both of which are accurate, depending on the story). In essence, his mental disability is primarily made visible by the hyperbolized and stereotypical way that artists illustrate his lunacy. Thus, readers are discouraged from trying to understand the character; instead, they are conditioned to see him as dangerous, threatening, and unpredictable. Essentially, Legion is defined by stereotypes and his disabilities.

Although her disability is not as visually hyperbolized in her appearance, Jessica Cruz is no less stereotyped in her actions to showcase her agoraphobia. The 2014's introduction of a new Green Lantern, Jessica Cruz, set back portrayals of disabilities in comic books not only through a disability studies lens, but also through a feminist lens. Jessica Cruz receives a power ring when its original bearer dies. Dissimilar to the Green Lantern rings that operate based on the wearer's courage and willpower, Jessica's Ring of Volthoom operates off its host's fear and susceptibility. Jessica is chosen by the Ring of Volthoom because she has suffered from agoraphobia since she witnessed the murder of her friends years prior. Artists and writers display her agoraphobia visually by frequently putting her balled up in corner of a small room hugging her knees with her eyes squeezed shut, even in the middle of a battle sequence, as though people battling agoraphobia retreat to this position in any stressful situation. It is not until Batman, and later Hal Jordon (Green Lantern), teach Cruz how

to cope with her anxieties that she becomes more consistent as a hero, thus reaffirming the medical model of disabilities, which implies that a character must be cured to be a competent superhero. Even worse, it reinforces the stereotype that a woman needs a strong, rational man to save her because she is weak and irrational. As if to assure the reader that Batman and Green Lantern have cured Cruz of her unseen disability, she gets a regular Green Lantern ring that operates off courage and willpower only after they help to “cure” her. The reader is then reassured that Green Lantern rings choose their wearer based on that person's ability to overcome fear. Even so, Cruz continues to struggle with agoraphobia as the defining characteristic of her character, and comic book authors use this defining disability to create cheap, sentimental plots that are damaging not only to portrayals of disabled superheroes but also to women in general.

Some invisible disabilities are depicted more subtly in terms of characters' appearances. Often these characters are portrayed more realistically and consequently, humanized. They become heroes with disabilities rather than heroes defined by their disabilities. And the disability most commonly portrayed in this realistic fashion is addiction to substances. Perhaps the most realistic aspect of the superhero-battling-addiction trope is the tendency for such characters to stay addicted through rough time-displacements and reboots. By remaining addicted through multiple retellings, the authors reaffirm the long-standing medical diagnosis that people cannot be cured of substance addictions. Thus, dissimilar to visible disabilities that get cured with technology or cybernetic appendages, addiction has no prosthesis or cure. This incurable factor reflected in comic book superheroes helps make the characters more realistic and diverges from the medical model previously described. The portrayal of these superheroes battling addiction falls into the more politically correct social model, perhaps because addictions such as alcoholism are more socially accepted.

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The following section focuses on substance addictions in just a few of these superheroes to demonstrate how more realistic portrayals of invisible disabilities often follow a social model of disability, for a comprehensive list would involve a much larger undertaking than this article.<sup>16</sup> In Marvel Comics, both Iron Man and Ant-Man battle addictions to alcohol, and in DC Comics, Roy Harper battles an addiction to alcohol and narcotics. Surprisingly, all three of these characters remain superheroes despite their addictions. Even though the reader is made aware of their disabilities, writers do not constantly mention their addictions, so the reader sees a normalized hero whose disability is a part of his character rather than a defining characteristic. This completely contrasts the Green Lantern Jessica Cruz whose agoraphobia defines her character, leading to an extremely problematic narrative for representations of disabilities.

*Invincible Iron Man* 128 (1978) reveals that Tony Stark (Iron Man) has been binge drinking to deal with the stress of running a company, facing death, and being an Avenger. Visibly, he becomes more disheveled, until a friend, Beth, intervenes and sets him on the path to sobriety. Although he does display visible markers of alcoholism such as sleep deprivation, indicated by his disheveled appearance, these visual markers are not as comically over the top as those surrounding Legion or as stereotypical as those surrounding Jessica Cruz. As previously mentioned, his teammate, Hank Pym, also battles with an addiction that is possibly even worse than Stark's.

In *1000 Facts about Comic Book Characters*, James Eagan writes, "Hank Pym is surprisingly violent and abusive for a 'good guy'" (Eagan, 2019). In the Marvel Universe, there are two reasons for Pym's behavior. The first is a (mis)communication between the writer and the artist, and the second is to maintain continuity in Pym's story. As the myth has been told from comic book store to store, Hank Pym became a domestic abuser because of a communication problem between writer Jim Shooter and artist

Bob Hall. The result is Hank Pym, tired, stressed and drunk smacking his wife, Janet, while she is in her miniaturized Wasp form. (Shooter 2018). Apparently, the script called for Pym to shoo her, but comic book art made everything bigger and more exaggerated, and in that moment, an Avenger became criminal. Marvel was quick to note that Pym had been drinking and used this drinking as a partial explanation for his abusive behavior. The other explanation, according to Eagan, is that Pym had suffered from bipolar disorder after the death of his first wife, Maria. From then on, Marvel switched the narrative to focus on Pym as an alcoholic who turns violent when he becomes intoxicated. Both Stark and Pym here have an unseen disability—addiction—one that is often portrayed in criminals in comics but not so much among heroes. When it is, it evades study, perhaps because something such as alcoholism has become almost "normalized" in a way that visual disabilities are not and produces a different kind of spectacle. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5th ed., Substance Use Disorder "is a cluster of cognitive, behavioral, and psychological symptoms...An important characteristic of substance abuse disorders have on the mind and body, they are listed under the ADA as a disability. These disabilities, many times, are completely undetectable physically, so they go unrecognized in disability studies. But the field could only benefit from conducting a more comprehensive analysis encouraging similarly realistic representations of invisibly disabled superheroes.

In comic books, it has been typical for street level heroes such as Daredevil, Punisher, and Batman to combat "junkies" in the street, and these criminals were usually dirty, dressed in rags, and illustrated with sunken eyes, making their disability more conspicuous. No matter how many times they were drugged or sprayed with hallucinogens however, comic book superheroes seemed immune to drug addiction themselves. This immunity, however, changed in 1971's *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* 85. As a publicity stunt for the failing title, writer Dennis



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O'Neil and artist Neil Adams took a chance and did the unthinkable: they made a hero a drug addict. In this issue, Green Arrow discovers that his ward, Roy Harper, has been selling Arrow's technology on the streets to make money to buy heroin. The cover of the issue alone is shocking for 1971, showing an aghast Green Lantern and Green Arrow walking in on Roy, a loaded heroin needle on the table beside him; he is covering the track marks on his arm with his hand, his costume still on except for his mask.

Interestingly, all three of the aforementioned characters have maintained their unseen disabilities throughout retcons, changes in timelines, and reboots. Even after two reincarnations of the DC Universe (New 52 and Rebirth) Roy Harper remains an addict. Issues of Red Hood and the Outlaws show his shame when he resorts to drinking alcohol to cope with his stress. He also defends longtime Batman villain Killer Croc when The Outlaws see Harper talking to him. Harper informs the team that Killer Croc is his Alcoholics' Anonymous sponsor, a role that, despite his homicidal tendencies, Killer Croc takes very seriously. In this moment, the reader suspends disbelief and sees a heroic side to Croc. Perplexingly, these characters and others like them with unseen disabilities are under-studied when many of their storylines show their disabilities as naturalized aspects of the heroes' lives, not positioned as what defines them, or what makes them sympathetic or wondrous.

As much as is possible, these representations of unseen disabilities are realistic. Dissimilar to the case of Hawkeye, writers remember that these characters are disabled, perhaps because of the moral implications associated with addiction. For instance, society seems to judge people battling addiction as being morally corrupt in some way, whereas it does not hold the same prejudice for the deaf community. Thus, the moral depravity associated with addiction seems to challenge the ethos associated with superheroes. Omitting that a character is battling addiction removes the metaphorical "demons" he is battling within himself. To

remind the reader of these "demons", every now and again, writers and artists will show these superheroes in situations where they point out that they are fighting to maintain their sobriety. In the best cases, their struggles are secondary to their heroisms, and their addictions do not define them to the point of narrative prosthesis. If substance abuse can be represented this way (largely because of the omnipresence of alcoholism in our society), comic book artists and writers can certainly invest in maintaining and preserving the disability status of other disabled characters.

Disabled superheroes have been a part of comic books since the Golden Age, but their portrayals have often been problematic for various reasons. Because comic books are a visual medium, artists gave (and often still give) heroes exaggerated appearances to emphasize their disabilities. Donald Blake leaned heavily on his cane, Professor Xavier remained in his wheelchair day and night in every panel, and Freddy Batson stood knock-kneed and twisted. As scholars began to apply disability studies to comic books, they gravitated toward these characters with visible—often exaggerated—disabilities, but even the most comprehensive works on the subject have their shortcomings. They tend to be too broad-based with their analyses or focus solely on characters with visible disabilities. While it is important to develop research on comic book characters with visible disabilities, it is also equally important to analyze characters with invisible disabilities, lest they run the risk of being mis-portrayed or stereotyped. In either case, in-depth analyses of disabled characters and how they represent disabilities in general are often neglected, instead relying on common tropes such as those noted by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson: namely the wondrous, the sentimental, the exotic, and very rarely, the realistic. By identifying these trite portrayals, scholars and fans alike can challenge offensive, condescending, and inconsistent portrayals of disabilities, pressuring comic book creators to successfully meet the challenge of producing more realistic representations of disabilities on the page.

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These more realistic disabled characters should not be defined by their disabilities nor should their disabilities be treated as diseases to be cured; rather, artists and writers should normalize disabilities, depicting them as parts of a character's identity instead of as apart from the character or otherwise as the character's defining quality. Perhaps, then, more heroes such as Oracle can emerge, not as a supercrip, sentimental figure, or savage, but as a well-rounded disabled character whom the reader values as an integral part of the story playing out on those pages full of picture panels. Doing so would normalize characters with disabilities and engage a new generation of fans who are open to the images of non-traditional superheroes.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The past tense "required" is used here because both Professor Xavier and Oracle walk again in their newer incarnations at the time this article is written.

<sup>2</sup> Hawkeye has been deafened on two different occasions, the second to remind the audience that the character is deaf. This leads to the question, "How can a deaf character become deaf again?" The answer is simply that many storylines seem to ignore the fact that he is deaf.

<sup>3</sup> This article recognizes that there is a problem with applying the medical model of disability that displays disabilities as problems to be fixed. The medical model problem is addressed later in the essay.

<sup>4</sup> In *The Fantastic Four* comic book—especially in the 1970s-80s—onlookers often point and stare at the Thing and run from him.

<sup>5</sup> This, however, is not the first time that Hawkeye lost his hearing, as years earlier he put a sonic arrow in his mouth to cancel the effects of a mind controlling machine. He was later brought back from another dimension, comic book style, with his hearing fully restored. For once, a comic book hero was retconned, or revised, to regain his disability.

<sup>6</sup> This article recognizes the work of José Alaniz whose title *Death, Disability, and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond* suggests that death in comic books is sometimes treated as a disability. In such a case, characters such as Deadman and Red Hood would be exotic representations of disability; however, this article does not accept the premise that comic book death alone is a disability.

<sup>7</sup> *The Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe '89* states that Angel can fold his wings until they are tightly flush against him, making them almost imperceptible beneath some clothes such as heavy jackets.

<sup>8</sup> The use of the word "human" here contrasts "mutant", which in Marvel Comics are two separate species, i.e. "homo sapiens" versus "homo superior."

<sup>9</sup> "Photographic memory" is in quotes here as it is a debatable term and considered by many neurologists to be erroneous. It is more accurate to state that Barbara Gordon may have high superior Autobiographical Memory (HSAM), which would account for her uncanny ability to remember exact details from a crime scene.

<sup>10</sup> Retcon is short for "retroactive continuity," which suggests that an author has changed a character's past to facilitate something in the present storyline.

<sup>11</sup> Acute Traumatic Disorder is used here in accordance with the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* as an umbrella term that covers conditions such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

<sup>12</sup> *The Fat Detective* by S. Gilman does well in applying the notion of obesity being a disability in the pulp genre.

<sup>13</sup> The overcoming narrative here shows the disability as an obstacle which the hero must surmount. These tales are different than the narrative prosthesis, where the disability is often eventually ignored or rendered innocuous. The latter would



## It's Okay to Stare, continued

### Notes, (cont...)

better describe characters such as Hawkeye mentioned in this article.

<sup>14</sup> The argument here does not deny that Legion is disabled, but he is often listed as having Autism and Multiple Personality Disorder. The prescription of these disorders are the product of a sensationalized image of “crazy” people in the 1980s when Legion was created. It is more accurate to state that Legion suffers from Dissociative Identity Disorder.

<sup>15</sup> This article focuses on the comic book character Legion and not his television counterpart 1) because the focus of the article is comic books and 2) because Legion’s “insanity” in the television show is suggested to be a result of the Shadow King manipulating his thoughts rather than Legion having a mental disability.

<sup>16</sup> According to the National Institute of Health and the DSM, alcohol abuse, alcohol dependency, narcotic abuse, and narcotic dependency are types of psychological and physical disabilities.

## It's Okay to Stare, continued

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