**LITERARY
DISABILITY
STUDIES**

**DISABILITY IN COMIC
BOOKS AND GRAPHIC
NARRATIVES**

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

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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.

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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 assymetrlist [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.

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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 narrational 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 narrational 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, incompleteness, 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 désœuvrée*—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.

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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*.

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4

Standing Orders: Oracle, Disability, and Retconning

José Alaniz

For Rosemarie Garland-Thomson¹

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