



# **Articulations**

*Dale Jacobs and Jay Dolmage*



# Origins of Our Collaboration

Articulations represents our collaboration about comics, rhetoric, and Disability Studies, a collaboration that began with our 2012 essay, "Difficult Articulations: Comics Autobiography, Trauma, and Disability." This first essay focused on David Small's *Stitches*, but laid out a grounding method and argument for the framing of comics through Disability Studies, as well as the value that Comics Studies can bring to disability. When we were later asked to contribute to the collection *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives*, it struck us that we still had more to say about the ideas we had begun to articulate in that first essay. Settling on Georgia Webber's *Dumb* as our main text, we began to explore more fully how comics can act as both a space for negotiating the meanings around bodies/minds and as an embodied form of expression. Several years later we became interested in how theories of embodiment and identity derived from Disability Studies might combine with an approach to comics as ecological maps or territories, spaces within which existing social and ecological relations could be instantiated, revisited, and critiqued. From those conversations came "Accessible Articulations: Comics and Disability Rhetorics in *Hawkeye* #19," the third link in the articulation of our ongoing consideration of comics and disability rhetorics.

# Collaboration TIMELINE

**2012**  
Difficult  
Articulations



**2018**  
Mutable  
Articulations



**2016**  
Mutable  
Articulations

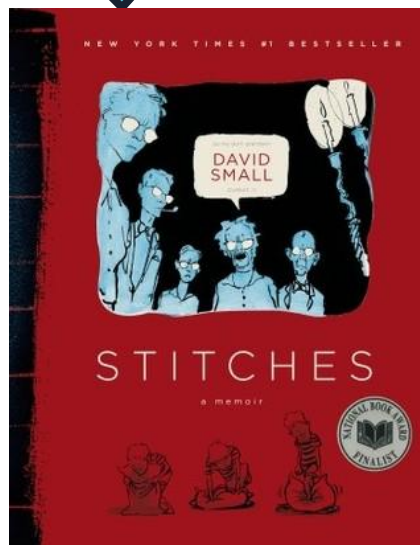


**2022**  
Articulations  
At a Glance



# ***DIFFICULT ARTICULATIONS***

2012





# ***ACCESSIBLE ARTICULATIONS***

2018





**As multimodal texts, comics allow for multiple modes of representation, while also providing, or at least potentially providing, the means to question the limitations of these modes. As well, comics demand that we attend closely to the multiple forms of expression available in the medium, while seeing these forms as interconnected rather than hierarchical. Finally, comics allow meanings to multiply in the tension created by the act of representation.**



**We view comics as both a space for negotiating the meanings around bodies/minds, and comics as an embodied form of expression. In doing so, we have tried to build on disability studies work that calls for attention not just to how meaning is attached to disability, but that views the knowledge and meaning that disability *generates*, moving beyond policing negative portrayals of disability to recognizing disability as an engine of innovation and rhetorical invention. In this way, we see the potential of comics to go beyond the use of disability as narrative prosthesis—a kind of multimodal, narrative shorthand—and to *become a form of prosthesis themselves*, an additional tool in making meaning accessible and for intervening in and interrogating disability as a “representational system.”**





# Articulating Agency

What follows is an example from Georgia Webber's *Dumb* to show how we have attempted to put comics theory into productive dialogue with disability theory as a means to interrogate and develop a disability rhetoric for the comic form. An earlier version first appeared in "Mutable Articulations."



**Independently produced and distributed (then collected by Fantagraphics in 2018)), *Dumb* is, in Webber's words, "a comics series about my prolonged voice loss, and the slow crawl of recovery" (np). The first issue, in which Georgia's persistent throat pain is diagnosed as an injury resulting from her over use/abuse of her vocal chords, Webber sets the stage for the chronicle of voice loss in the subsequent issues. As well, this issue establishes the connection between the colour red (the only colour used other than black, grey, and white) and voice/sound, a connection to which she will turn repeatedly throughout the series. As is the case in many disability narratives, it is only when Webber has been diagnosed by a doctor that this story becomes officially *about* disability.**

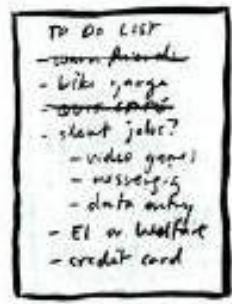
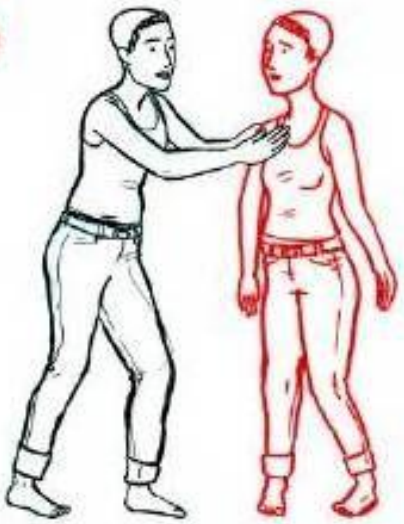


**Dumb Issue 1, Final Page**



**Instructions: Click on the pushpin icons on the following comics spread to take you to a new slide with details about that part of the comic. To return to the comic spread click the image of Georgia in the bottom left corner.**







**In this sequence—what we have come to call the “splitting” section—Webber begins her attempt to deconstruct disability by “demonstrating the pathology and psychic impairment within the seemingly productive art of comic book writing” (Squier 88). The red-penciled Georgia is but one articulation of self and in “splitting,” Webber endeavors to come to terms with how she is to manage these multiple selves.**





In “splitting,” Webber takes advantage of the possibility in the comics medium of articulating multiple narratives simultaneously. Along the bottom of the eleven pages that make up this section, Webber utilizes three panels per page to tell the story of the tasks she must perform in order to best engage her new situation: quitting her job at the café, telling friends, applying for other jobs, requesting emergency financial aid, registering as temporarily disabled, applying for welfare, and requesting a higher credit limit. As Webber shows through these thirty-three panels, the process is clearly exhausting, but does end with a panel that shows a hand attaching a note to the wall next to her computer which reads, “it’s going to be okay.”





**Parallel to the narrative at the bottom of the page, the upper two-thirds of each page is taken up with a series of unbordered panels in which Georgia is shown to be wrestling with her divided self. We see the initial process of separation in which the red-penciled version of Georgia is shown to emerge from the drawing of Georgia done in black, a representation in keeping with the way she has been drawn throughout the comic to this point.**







**As readers encounter this image of two Georgias, they will (or at least could) make connections back to the way the colour red was linked to sound in issue 1, the red circles of the final page of that issue, and the earlier depiction of this image in the paratext to this issue (and its proximate association with the first panel of “aftermath”). All of these connections push readers to see the ensuing conflict between these two versions of Georgia in terms of silence (her new normal) versus sound (the voice that fights to be released, even though such release would be detrimental to physical recovery).**





**The conflict between these split selves literally plays out on top of the life events depicted in the bottom panels so that as readers move through these parallel narratives, they are forced to think about the relationship between them. When the fight ends in an image of the black-penciled version of Georgia helping up the red-penciled version, the image is accompanied by “it’s going to be okay,” the words that appear in the final panel of the other narrative. Despite this image and these words, however, it is an uneasy peace, an articulation of selves that is stable only for the moment and subject to further reinterpretations as Webber moves through her story. It is in this section that Webber begins to reclaim some of the agency to dictate disability within her own terms, agency seemingly ceded to the doctor in issue 1.**





Webber shows that many of these tasks and much of this splitting is frustrating and difficult, set not in dream time or the idealized and empowering chronology of the montage, but in what Margaret Price calls "crip time," a concept that reveals how social structures drain the time and energy of people with disabilities, as when Webber is repeatedly refused economic support from service agencies and banks. The point or the effect of narrating these events multimodally is to physically reveal, across panels, that disability *takes time*, doesn't move easily towards resolution, accommodation, cure or rehabilitation. In fact, throughout the comic from the moment of diagnosis on, including in the section on "splitting," Webber reveals how these temporal and spatial restrictions are at least in part socially and culturally created, as well as the ways that people experiencing disability can find or invent their own agency and order within these restrictions.





We began writing together in the early 2000s, focusing on critical pedagogy and the teaching of writing. But then there was a hiatus, in which we began pushing our research in different directions—comics studies and disability studies. When we began to discuss and share ideas about the ways that graphic narratives depicted disability, we were excited to realize that we might write together again. Initially, each of us wrote independently, crafting material around our own research specialties and then brought it all together in what was a fairly seamless process. By the time we finished writing the first of those articles, we had developed a trust in each other and our shared writing process that made writing the next two articles surprisingly easy. Writing rarely works this way, we know, but for us it always comes back to trust. We continue to share ideas with one another, and to talk about what we are reading, looking forward to writing together again.





## Dale Jacobs

Dale Jacobs is the author of *Graphic Encounters: Comics and the Sponsorship of Multimodal Literacy* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) and the co-author (with Heidi LM Jacobs) of *100 Miles of Baseball* (Biblioasis, 2021). He is the editor of *The Myles Horton Reader* (University of Tennessee Press, 2003), and co-editor (with Laura Micciche) of *A Way to Move: Rhetorics of Emotion and Composition Studies* (Boynton Cook/Heinemann, 2003). His essays on comics have appeared in such journals as *Inks*, *English Journal*, *College Composition and Communication*, *Biography*, *ImageText*, *Journal of Comics and Culture*, *Studies in Comics*, and *Journal of Teaching Writing*. His hybrid creative nonfiction/academic book, *On Comics and Grief: The 1976 Project*, is forthcoming from Wilfred Laurier University Press.



## Jay Dolmage

Jay is committed to disability rights in his scholarship, service, and teaching. His work brings together rhetoric, writing, disability studies, and critical pedagogy. His first book, entitled *Disability Rhetoric*, was published with Syracuse University Press in 2014. *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education* was published with Michigan University Press in 2017 and is available in an open-access version online. *Disabled Upon Arrival: Eugenics, Immigration, and the Construction of Race and Disability* was published in 2018 with Ohio State University Press. He is the Founding Editor of the *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*.

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# THANKS

Do you have any questions?

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