

Stories from the brainreels podcast transcript

September 30, 2016

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Introduction

CHERYL: Welcome to Stories from the brainreels monthly podcast about brain injury and disability with a focus on art, culture, and disability pride.

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Here is an interview with a pair of ass-kickingly talented artists. Today, I'm talking to two people who I admire so much as artists, friends, and mentors, [Sabine Rear](#), a blind illustratrix, and [Arianna Warner](#), who has invisible disabilities and creates experiential arts events. Even though they have a ton in common and they were at Portland State University at the same time, they'd never met before. That just had to change. Sabine joined me here in Portland to record, but Arianna had just moved to California about one minute before we were gonna record. Fortunately, we caught up with her on Skype the night before she started a brand new, full-time job. Hopefully, recording didn't steal any spoons she'd need the next morning starting her job. And if you heard that last sentence and wondered whether Arianna now works in a cutlery factory or why she'd need to bring more than one spoon to work on her first day, please go check out "[The Spoon Theory](#)," a staple reading within sick, disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent communities.

Many of us media makers have written and spoken tons about disability representation in TV and movies. A lot of what we say centers around the odd absence of disability, and when it is there, it's usually non-disabled people playing disabled characters, and they're nearly always white, cis, and straight. Often, disability shows up as something to fear or as an opportunity to teach a cheerful after-school-special once-off lesson to non-disabled people about pluckiness, keeping their chins up, and other supposedly inspiring, but flat, ideas. You do also sometimes see it in sci-fi but not nearly enough. [And it used to be part of Star Trek, but oops, that didn't last](#). But one place disability shows up a ton is in superhero comics, though it hardly ever gets talked about by #ActuallyDisabled people.

I encourage you to look into [other comics and zines](#) created from and within disability community! For instance, [E.T. Russian](#), Roz Alexander-Kasparik's comic book, "[Recall and Given](#)," [Georgia's Dumb Project](#) (near and dear to my heart because of my own voice disorder), Synthia Nicole's [Damaged Mentality Zine](#) (near and dear to my heart because of my brain injury), and oh gosh, so many more. Some of them have disabled superheroes, and many of them are using the comic form to bring up social, political, identity, and medical topics in very innovative, non-super ways.

You can subscribe to this podcast on iTunes, Stitcher Radio, and SoundCloud. More details about guests and links are at the blog at [whoamitostopit.com](#), and screen-reader accessible podcast transcripts are there too. Don't forget some great neurodiversity pride swag at [cafepress.com/whoamitostopit](#). All proceeds go toward the documentary "Who Am I To Stop It" about artists with traumatic brain injury.

Thank you, rescuedsheep, for the music today. It is so cute and makes me laugh every time I hear it and think about all the fantastic disabled comic stars who could be doing their starring to this theme!

Meet the artists

[music]

CHERYL: Well, holy cow. I am so excited, I cannot tell you. I'm here with the crip comics what's the word? Uh, uh....

SABINE: [huge laugh] I'm going for another c-word, but I can't get there.

CHERYL: Yeah. The crip comics....Well, I wanna say connoisseurs, but you're not just connoisseurs of crip comics. You're creators. Oh!

SABINE: Ah! Eh!

CHERYL: Creators.

ARIANNA: [laughs]

[music]

CHERYL: I'm here with two outrageously amazing crip comics creators, Sabine and Arianna.

SABINE: Yeah. I'm Sabine Rear. I make comics and zines. I've been working on them since I finished my bachelor's at Portland State and needed something to siphon all of my new academic feelings and thoughts into, to avoid the glowering void.

CHERYL: [chuckles]

SABINE: My project right now that I'm most focused on is a series of conversations I'm having with other crips who ride the bus in Portland. I'm sitting down with folks for about an hour and talking about the bus, their workarounds, their experiences, and what is uniquely scary, cool, complicated about the public/private space of the bus as a visible or not visible disabled person. And I'm illustrating those conversations, and then there will be a multi-media component where folks provide Audio Description, since I'm a blind lady, and I am aware of the really cute conundrum of making visual art as a blind person.

ARIANNA: I'm Arianna Warner. I am a recent graduate of the Art and Social Practice MFA program at Portland State University, and I do work that kind of is at the intersection of disability studies and building communities. A part of that, I'm in the process of creating the Institute for Crip Comics. So it's kind of a hub for all things comics involving disabilities and looking at them from a disability studies perspective. There's a couple different branches of that, that is actively engaging those comic books, whether it's in the creation of it and the stories of having a disability experience, and then also into how that transforms into education materials for accessible media to teach disability studies discourse.

CHERYL: All right. More than anything, I wanted to interview the two of you together to listen to you two talk about the way that you are taking your own disability experience and not being inspirational, not being focused on cures and medicine, but on celebrating lived experiences and challenging ableism through comics! All right, go!

ALL: [laugh]

"Crip" and Disability Studies

CHERYL: You said "crip" early on.

SABINE: OK, yeah. Crip is like new, exciting language for me. I guess crip and Disability Studies are really connected for me. I graduated from Portland State with my BA, which you just got your MFA. So we were in the same land. I spent the last couple years of my BA just trying to shoehorn Disability Studies into a space that it didn't exist. Portland State has interest but definitely not infrastructure or faculty or not a lot of base of knowledge. And that is a really cool, scrappy experience, I think, to get to have, is to place crips where they are not invited.

CHERYL: [laughs]

SABINE: And so I came to crip, I think, in an academic space, and it felt super exciting to me because I feel very aggressive about the way I talk about my disability. And specifically, partway through getting my BA, I met another blind adult, which I very rarely got to do at the time, who was like, "Why do you call yourself visually impaired? [chuckles] That's not necessary. You could just call yourself 'blind' and use whatever language you want. I'm sure people are referring to you as visually impaired in your experience with medical professionals, but that's not your only option." And I think that is a choice that I get questioned on all the time because the language around presenting or not presenting crip means it's considered a compliment to say like, "I can't tell that you're blind!"

CHERYL: Mm.

SABINE: Like, thank you. So those two initially are wrapped up in each other in an academic space. And then crip, I think, when you take it out into the world, it feels aggressive, it feels transgressive, and it feels like also very playful. So linguistically, I really like dancing around that. And it's new. It's new for lots of folks who haven't thought of themselves as being a part of a radical and politicized community and having a chance to play with language in that way, I think, is really exciting.

CHERYL: I'm so intrigued by how you came to crip in an academic space, like Disability Studies, but you also said "politicized" and "radical." A lot of times, those two don't really go together. I'm excited that you did find them together. That's very nice, yes. So Arianna, you did art in an academic space around disability too.

ARIANNA: Absolutely. What's really interesting too is kind of reflecting or mirroring what Sabine was saying about how at Portland State there's no Disability Studies. I mean, there's not really a community around disability or the disability experience. For me, it's such an integral part of my life of having this invisible disability, and I'm somebody who constantly needs to find ways to explain my situation to other people. And I don't have to; I'm being questioned, though, constantly about like, "Oh, well why can you do this and not do this?" Or "What is this?" And a) it's none of your business, and b) I try to just do it on my own terms to be able to express myself. So that's where my art practice became involved with art and social practice of taking a personal, private experience and making it public in a way that I feel comfortable that I can alter or direct in a certain way so that it's not asking really inappropriate questions about my body. It's more about the artwork and about how it can bring people together. And so for me, thinking about Disability Studies and being really interested and passionate about learning more about disability culture and the history of disability, I try to find different ways to investigate that in a space that, academically, doesn't support that. And it's really hard when you are constantly faced with multiple institutions, many institutions, most institutions I would even say, that don't prioritize or even offer Disability Studies. So basically saying, "Your history or your culture isn't worth us examining,

isn't worth us having or investing in. It's not worthy." So for me, it's hard. So again, it goes back to crip and being really political in a way to be like, "OK, well, even though you're not investing this, it's a priority for me. So I'm going to make projects like the Institute for Crip Comics where I'm forcing you to think about disability." I'm doing it in a, not a so much sneaky way, but in a way that's integrating it into classes, into studies that are not focused on disability necessarily. But in a sneaky way, I'm making it about disability and having you experience and be more aware of what the disability experience is in America.

CHERYL: Yeah. And you talked about culture. I often think that that's one of the reasons that people don't want to deal with it, because they just can't even conceive that there's a culture around it. Like, "Oh, disability culture. You mean rehab?"

SABINE: Ha!

CHERYL: No.

SABINE: So when there's this kind of confusion around what representation means and what the concept of a crip culture existing is so contested and confusing on such a base level, I think that's where crip becomes really useful. Because it is aggressive and particular, and it insists on using sorta confrontational language to demand space.

CHERYL: Yeah. And to demand accessible space, right? Sabine, you mentioned that the storytellers in your comics project will also create the Audio Description. I'm really interested in accessibility, not as an end goal. We can't have social justice if there's no access, but it's not good enough to only have access. You wanna have access to creating and consuming culture, participating civically, etc., etc.

SABINE: Yeah. I like, in that way, especially for the comics and thinking about being a blind person making visual art, talking with some blind folks for this project and wanting them to be able to access this project in one way or another. I really like access materials as secret code.

CHERYL: Ooh! Say more.

SABINE: Right, so you go to the art museum, and you listen to the guide for the blind. It's the most basic garbage like, "The painting is a square."

CHERYL: [laughs] Gawd.

SABINE: What I want is to go to the art museum and be trusted to have and want knowledge. So I wanna go to the museum and go to a Sol LeWitt show and have them share, "Sol LeWitt is a modernist artist who moved away from painting things himself and left detailed instructions" about how-- It's like, I want information and maybe even more information than is being offered to an able visitor a propos of just trusting that crips are there because they want to be there, and that there is value in providing access and space and information.

CHERYL: Arianna, you've also talked about access in terms of trust like, trust me. I actually do know what my body wants right now.

ARIANNA: It's interesting, especially again, in the art world, when thinking about access, a lot of people tend--and this is a huge generalization, but a lot of people--think of blind/visually impaired access, wheelchair access, and D/deaf and Hard-of-hearing access as a kind of the big groups of figuring out how

to make something accessible. For somebody who doesn't fit within any of those three, it's really hard to have a conversation about how to make something accessible to somebody who has chronic pain or somebody who is neurodivergent. You start getting into these conversations about having to explain a) what that is to begin with, and then b) that there's not always this $A + B = \text{access}$.

CHERYL: Right!

ARIANNA: There's not always a structure of, "Oh, well, you just blank, and it's accessible." And so those conversations get really difficult for people to grasp, I think, because you have to talk to the person, and you have to, first of all, get comfortable enough asking, "OK, how can I support you to be able to experience this as much as *you* as an individual want to experience this? How can we best make that happen?" And I think if you don't even know that's a question to ask, it's just like, "Oh gawd! There's a person who has a disability, and I don't wanna say the wrong thing," and all of these different things. Definitely, when they attempt, even though they may have good intentions, coming up to somebody and being like, "Oh, I noticed that you're handicapped. Can I assist you in doing this?"

CHERYL and SABINE: [chuckle]

ARIANNA: You're like, "Oh my gosh! There's so many issues with what you just said!!"

CHERYL: Uh-huh.

ARIANNA: So I think that there needs to be more conversations and making people feel more comfortable to ask questions about access for everyone, as a thing that you ask anybody. Because not all disabilities are visible, and so if somebody needs to experience a painting, they need to sit on the bench or whatever, even though you might look like a very able-bodied, healthy 26 year old, they're gonna give the chair to the 70 year old man who is walking by. They're gonna say, "Oh, here. You can sit here." But they're not gonna ask me or say like I can sit there, necessarily. So I think there's a lot of stigmas. I think there's a lot of education that needs to happen about access. And then also, just offering things in multiple ways for people to interact or engage with a piece. Then, people can pick whatever they want. So that's something that I've been really thinking about with my art practice for the Institute for Crip Comics, for example, we're gonna have all these comic books and all these artists a part of this collective. How do we make these comic books accessible? OK, well, we could have 30 different versions of comic books, but that's not the point. The point is that everybody can access the same comic book in multiple ways. So figuring out how all these puzzle pieces kinda fit together has been really exciting, and I've worked with a couple different people that create accessible material in order to jumpstart making comic books more accessible for people with disabilities.

CHERYL: Yeah. So you're working with other people. Have you met my friend, Sabine Rear, who also does comics?

ALL: [giggle]

SABINE: That was a great advertisement for me! But what I'm thinking about as you say that is that I find access materials the most creative and helpful when other disabled people are making them.

ARIANNA: Mmhmm.

Crip Community

SABINE: That's a part of crip community that I find really exciting. When I say "crip community," that's like a really new concept for me. I think my first time being in a room of almost exclusively disabled people was when Cheryl and I met.

CHERYL: [gasps]

SABINE: I found out I'd really hurt your feelings at that conference in Seattle. And then we worked that out, and then we both cried, and now we're friends.

CHERYL: It was the most beautiful.

SABINE: [laughs]

CHERYL: I cannot. Excuse me. I need to let you finish your story, but you taught me so much. That was the biggest learning experience for me around grace and forgiveness. Oh my gawd. That was....Excuse me. Please, finish your story.

SABINE: But the root of that experience was about how I had not known how to out myself between disabled people, how to do that, and why it was really important. I was asked to interview Cheryl for a well-meaning magazine, and I did a bad, bad job. I didn't clarify the subject position I was coming from because I wasn't at the point where I understood that crip is a subject position, and it's always gonna be the one I operate from. So I didn't out myself, and I didn't clarify. I sent very blasé questions [chuckling] that Cheryl answered in a very intelligent "fuck you." But it was clearly, it did not go well. As soon as I got the answers back, I knew it didn't go well, but no one in my office really got that. So it just [chuckles] it just went into the world.

CHERYL: I did not realize that's how it happened!

SABINE: Oh yeah.

CHERYL: Cuz when I met you, you were so criptastic and embracing. I was like, now why did that happen? It makes perfect sense now.

SABINE: I was in this new world of working at a magazine where I was kind of, I think, deferent to the space I was in and yeah, just didn't know how to crip it up.

CHERYL: And I didn't know how to be generous with someone who's not yet speaking the language that I would want them to be speaking. Which is what you taught me in that conversation about generosity: Well, if I didn't ask you the questions from the position you like, you don't actually have to be completely aggressive, and then we publish it. But yeah--

SABINE: But I think we published it, partially, because it came out well. Because I think, no matter how much of a dingus I appeared in the context of those questions, I think what happened was it was an opportunity for people to read an aggressively thoughtful response from a crip to poorly-written questions. So this conference was my first experience in crip community. It was earth-shattering to be in a roomful of people just actually asking those thoughtful questions about what do you need to engage with this? Do you even wanna engage with this? How can I make this space work for you? But also, if we're sharing academic materials, if we're sharing a meal, how do I give you the space, respect, warmth that you want and need and deserve in the context of letting you experience what you wanna get out of

this academic space? At the time I was working on a paper on porn for blind people, and that was the first time I'd really gotten to share that with other disabled folks and really get a sense of oh, this is what the crip community has for me in response to this work. That was the most valuable experience that I had never had before because there's no space like that at Portland State but also anywhere. So carving out those spaces takes a ton of work, and I really commend the University of Washington for doing that work so consistently.

ARIANNA: For me, as somebody who has developed a disability at a young age, as a teenager, learning about disability was something that was really hard to access for me in the community that I grew up in.

SABINE: Yes!

ARIANNA: I think going into a space that's a crip space and offering up my experience and my opinions on that experience without the knowledge of other amazing crip people and information and knowledge, it would be really difficult for me to not come off as a complete--I don't know what the right word would be but--somebody that doesn't know what they're talking about. Or maybe somebody that projects ideas that are not in alignment with other crip stories or experiences. My question is, how did you discover a space where you felt comfortable in exploring crip theory or culture? And is it really about the individual self investigating those things, or is it about if we offer those spaces, it allows people to think more deeply about what it means to be crip?

SABINE: I love that thought. I think both of those things are definitely viable ways to get there, and I think as long as you get there, right? But it is hard to go and test out your crip body and theory on other crips and say like, "Here you go! You're welcome for me!"

CHERYL: [laughs]

SABINE: I came to crip through queer theory because I was playing around in queer theory and being queer and thinking the queerest part of my body in terms of presentation, in terms of what I'm questioned about in public, in terms of my sex practices is being blind. Those things get tangled up in such interesting ways. That was the most excited I'd ever felt in academia, and I think crip theory and queer theory are some of the most playful, most sort of welcoming but also high theory, academic spaces that I've ever experienced. So I started digging in academically and found this total play land of using language in ways that was funny and difficult and really aggressive and challenging. I know there's some very alienating things about that and about the academy, but I found it so exciting. It kinda let me in to the secret code of art that I hadn't understood as being crip or as being queer and learning how to read things in that way that was really exciting. So I think I went the way of trying it out academically, and trying it out academically in the context of the Portland State Women and Gender Studies department where people were like, "I don't know what this is! Cool!"

SABINE: [chuckles]

SABINE: So I got to play in that way for a while before I really met a community, which allowed me to put my foot in my mouth on paper a bunch of times before I really test drove being in a space that was really critically important to me that I do a good job being in that space. For better or for worse. But when I finally found that community, I was like, "Holy shit! This is a real place that exists!" This year, I went to the same symposium at the University of Washington. This symposium has existed over two years. Both years, we've closed by, after hearing each other's academic work on crip theory and public space and gender, the last day, both years, we've watched porn.

CHERYL: Mm!

SABINE: [laughing] And it's just such a special space to get to find and be a part of. So I think to find it academically and try it out individually and then get to test it out in a community and find oh wow, I can really get a lot of needs met in this community.

ARIANNA: Wow, great.

CHERYL: Oh my gawd. Arianna, did you also face some of that when you were in your MFA program like, "Huh. I don't know what that is, that crip disability stuff." Did people run with it the way Sabine was describing?

ARIANNA: How do I answer this [laughs]? I think that people definitely have their own place that they start from. I think understanding that was really difficult for me, is that not everybody's going to start where either I am or where I would hope that they would be. I think that there's definitely people that were more jumping on the bandwagon a little bit faster than others. And I think that it really comes back to the idea of how much are you willing to invest in something that you don't feel a part of?

CHERYL: Hmm.

ARIANNA: I think that was difficult to understand that, OK, why should I make this accessible to people even though that might not be the primary community that I'm engaging with? So those are kind of really big hurdles, from my perspective, to have people understand my practice. So that's been something that I've consistently had to think about. OK, well, how is the crip community going to perceive this project, and how can I engage with them and have this experience where everyone's coming together, and it's accessible and awesome? And on the other hand, having people who are able-bodied or how sometimes I like to use the word "temporarily able-bodied" to engage with a project that they have no investment in because they don't have that experience. I think, honestly, that's where I get more hung up on is why should anybody else care about my experience? How do I make them care about that, and why is that important? Is it important? It comes out in different ways. Sometimes I'm like well, I'm just one person that has this experience, and I don't have enough spoons to fight this battle right now. So I have to be more tactful with it. Then sometimes, I'm in your face and aggressive, crip, angry mama bear kind of person. And that gets me, sometimes, further, and sometimes that doesn't, it just makes me more angered and upset. And then I go crying to Cheryl, being like, "Help me!!! I can't make sense of all of this!" But at the end of the day, all of those scenarios, whether people are accepting and are invested or trying to understand, or they're not at all, and I'm dealing with whatever that may mean, it's been an experience that I've grown as an individual and as a crip and as somebody who has many experiences and many identities, and learning from that and really investigating why I have these emotions about the way that situations happen. And how can I move forward into interacting with other people that I might be trying to connect with or communicate with.

[music break]

Credibility as a Disabled Person

CHERYL: So there's an experience that I have, and I wanna know if you two have it as well. It's around credibility. So I think it's fair to say that at least at times, all three of us can pass as non-disabled, in certain scenarios, in certain activities. In non-disability space, I have more credibility as someone who passes: "Oh! You're one of the 'normal' ones. So clearly, you're smart and capable..." and all the assumptions that go with "non-disabled." And then, if I'm in disability space, and I'm passing, I lose

credibility. "Well, who the hell are you to come in here and talk?" So do you two find with passing or non-passing around disability or any other parts of your identities, do you find that credibility issue?

ARIANNA: Yes [laughs]!

SABINE: And yes. Yeah.

ARIANNA: [laughs] So I used to work at Portland State as the Inclusive Recreation Student Coordinator. So I was responsible for all the programs that are Campus Recreation that are specifically geared towards being inclusive for people with disability with able-bodied people. And that opens up a whole can of worms as well in some ways. I think what's interesting is that sometimes I became more credible about being knowledgeable about disability as this position title of somebody who works for the university and is in this role, rather than me as somebody who experiences disability on an everyday level. And it wasn't necessarily at Campus Recreation, but in other scenarios around campus, I was definitely seen more as an expert in this position, rather than my personal experience. I think that was something that was really hard for me to negotiate or navigate. If I go into a department, and I'm talking about Disability Studies, and say, "OK, I'm somebody that has a disability, I experience in these ways, and this is the knowledge that I have from that," they're like, "OK. Cool. You're just like any of our other students. Whatever." And then I go in, and I say, "Well, I'm the Student Coordinator for Inclusive Recreation," then all of a sudden, it's like, "Oh! Oh! So you know what you're talking about." You are being paid to know these things, and that makes this information that you know as the Student Coordinator more credible than just being somebody who lives with it every single day.

CHERYL: Ugh. It's like going to the doctor. "You couldn't possibly know about your own body! Let me tell you." What about you Sabine, around credibility and passing?

SABINE: Oh yeah. Unequivocally yes. For me, passing is still really well, passing is always poignant. I was gonna say, "For me, passing is still very poignant!"

ALL: [laugh]

SABINE: Yeah, it hurts. Everything hurts. I have been blind all my life, but the cane is new to me. I had a very Supercrip mentality growing up. So I was very resistant to learning tools. And at the same time, I think I was partially resistant because I was learning how to be blind from a sighted person.

CHERYL: Aha.

SABINE: A very kind and lovely sighted person, but that disconnect was not lost on me. So the cane is fairly new. So now that that transition from carrying or not carrying a cane, it's so clear to me that in public, that's flipping and unflipping a switch in terms of how I'm perceived. And it is exactly that immediate. In an able-bodied space, I'm questioned from, "How'd you cross that street?" to-- So this is a great space for me to just complain.

CHERYL: Mhmm!

SABINE: I got off the MAX and crossed the street. I'm covered in groceries. I'm literally growing groceries off of my limbs, and I'm just trying to get home. And a man stops me and is like, "How'd you get across the street?!" And I was like, "Lots of practice." And he walks away. I'm like, OK, I did it. I can go home now. He circles back to say, "By the way, I'm really handsome! Ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

ARIANNA and CHERYL: [gasp in distress]

SABINE: This is what we do. This is what we get to do with my time. This is what my time is for. It's for you, sir, white dude in your 2010 Buddhist Retreat t-shirt.

CHERYL: Oh my.

SABINE: This is what we're doing.

CHERYL: So he's interrogating you for your disabled body. He's presuming you're straight and that you wanna hear about his looks.

SABINE: Mmhmm.

CHERYL: So many. Presuming that you--

SABINE: That I want it. Cuz how could he be anything but charming? I'm very aware of that in the context of the cane being new, in the context of the work that I'm doing around the bus and around what it means to be in public and present. Then yeah, I think by the same token you're right, that in disabled spaces, I'm aware of how much space should I take up? I am able to do these things, not able to do these things, and I do start to test myself or perceive others as testing me in terms of where do I rate on the crip-crip scale?

CHERYL: Hmm!

SABINE: I think that actually has much more to do with me than it does with the people I am around. When I find myself doing that in crip spaces, I come away from it like, "What are you doing? Nobody gives a shit whether you can read the bathroom sign or not. Nobody's watching you." So I feel much less policed in crip spaces. I feel very policed in public.

Crippling Comics

CHERYL: Mmhmm. So let's come back to comic stuff. And if somebody could go back in time and read my mind and find that question that went away. Oh, yes!

SABINE: Well, so that was gonna be my question. It seems you're kind of creating a living archive of people sharing work, translating work--if you will--into accessible forms. I love hearing from crips especially what about comics as a medium works so well to address crip subjects. For me, not all of my work is crip-focused, but it's all about being disabled. I think that's just the deal for me. But yeah, what about comics is such a useful medium?

ARIANNA: Historically, you found comics in the daily newspaper, and it was an accessible medium that was really easy to replicate and be able to distribute among the masses, among anybody who bought a newspaper. And that's something that, for me, is really interesting because people don't have to invest a lot in a comic book if they don't want to. It's \$2-4 for one issue of a comic book. It's typically short. You can finish it in one sitting. So it's an accessible medium for people to have in their physical space. I think that with it being a very visually-based medium, it kind of added some interesting, I wouldn't necessarily say challenges, but opportunity to find other ways to make comics themselves be as accessible in a non-visual format. That's something that's been really exciting and interesting to me. I think also, there's a huge culture--I mean, I don't think. I know there's a huge culture--around comic books. So in order to be able to tap into a community that already exists to talk about issues that may not be at the front of

people's minds, to talk about some things that is very based on your experience. I think what's also interesting is that you can use them as education material. So a textbook is like hundreds of dollars sometimes, and it's written by some stuffy people in some room 50,000 years ago. They write this information, and we're supposed to take their word for it. I think with comic books, what's really nice is that you're able to have all these different experiences, all these different perspectives that can all kind of tell their own story and have their own light. But they're also part of this bigger narrative of Disability Studies and crip culture. That's something that has been really exciting to play with, and I'm super excited to start really making some headway with the ICC and just bringing artists and people with disabilities together and all people that love comic books and comic culture to really think about what it means to be somebody with a disability today, in different lands and different places, imagined or not and so yeah. That's what I'm really excited about.

CHERYL: You were talking about how there are things that people don't wanna talk about. I know that comics, especially the more famous comic books, really actually tackled disability all the time. Now, one of many things that you two are bringing to this is that you're not non-disabled people drawing somebody in a wheelchair. You're bringing your own experiences in. I have heard people very excited about talking about queering comics and the queerness of comic stories and comic characters, sort of queering the "mutantness" of certain characters. But then even though there are so many characters with very obvious physical disabilities or impairments, these same comic connoisseurs and critics don't ever bring up disability. And it's so weird to me!

SABINE: I think that comes from the same place where able-bodied folks are like, "Disability community? That's garbage! How do you even get them all into the same room, you know?!"

CHERYL: [laughs]

SABINE: I just think that the concept of crip, as an aggressive subject position with a desire for community and desiring disability at that fundamental level, where you're like yeah, I want-- When I was a kid, I wanted to marry someone who was visibly disabled. I was so fixated on this thought that I'm gonna have this hot person who's really visibly disabled so everyone will know that we're a power couple. I don't think I had it fleshed out in that way in my mind, but I was piqued by seeing young people who I could identify as disabled. Because I think as a kid, I was that blind girl where you're like, "Something's up, but I don't know. She's just running into stuff!"

CHERYL: [laughs]

SABINE: I wasn't being read the way I wanted, and I wanted that. Queer community is so solidified as desirable, at least queer to queer, that of course you-- And it's standard language, I think now, to "queer" things, to say like, "'Top Gun' is super gay!" And we love that. But to crip is, I think, more transgressive because it's not understood as a desirable subject position. So even though you're looking at a comic where someone is in a wheelchair, it's the last thing you wanna talk about because it's not read as a desirable subject position. It's a fatal character flaw or a metaphorical ability. I always fucking hated Daredevil because he's a blind guy, and his super power is that he can jump like a sighted guy.

CHERYL: [laughs]

SABINE: Like his superpower is just jumping and not running into things.

CHERYL: Oh my gawd.

ARIANNA: Which I think is really interesting. OK, so something I've done as a part of doing research for the Institute for Crip Comics is I've gone into a lot of different comic book stores, and I've asked the owners and people that work there--and anyone who's in the store usually jumps in as well--and saying, "OK, I'm doing research. Can you tell me anybody who is in any comic book, it doesn't matter what it is, fiction, non-fiction, whatever you have here, that has a disability?" Every single one of them has said, "Oh, I've never thought about that."

CHERYL: What?! How can you?

SABINE: Now, what they're saying is, "[Oh, moms love 'El Deafo'](#)." That's like the one where you're like, "Are you a parent of a disabled child? Here you go. 'El Deafo'." I'm glad it exists, and also one does not count. We don't just...blargh.

CHERYL: Now, so I mean there are characters who use wheelchairs, but they're not identifying that as a person with a disability?

ARIANNA: I'll stand there and just wait, cuz they'll be thinking. And they're like, "This is a great thing. I feel this challenge, and I feel as somebody who is a comic book lover, and I feel that I'm a comic book guru. So I should know. I should come up with these things." So they sit there, and literally I've been there for like 45 minutes, an hour, where they're thinking of these names. They always come up with Daredevil first. They come up with Batgirl, but then she is, what's her name?

CHERYL: Is it Barbara Gordon?

ARIANNA: [She gets shot, and then she's a wheelchair user](#). And later--

CHERYL: Barbara, right? Am I saying it wrong? Barbara? Is that a Senator?

SABINE: I don't know.

CHERYL: Barbara Gordon? Or no.

ARIANNA: That's it! That's it! Barbara Gordon.

CHERYL: OK. I was like, Barbara Jordon? No, Barbara Gordon.

ARIANNA: Yeah, Barbara Gordon. And then they go down this list and Professor X, from the X-Men. So they go down this list of all the super obvious ones that are the peak of comic book culture right now, or the most public or popular ones, I should say.

SABINE: The most dude ones! The dudes!

CHERYL: [laughs]

ARIANNA: Yes! So it's been really interesting. And then it becomes this competition in there, and they totally bro out in being like, "Oh, I can come up with more than you can."

SABINE and CHERYL: [chuckle]

ARIANNA: After they finish getting all the obvious ones or the ones that they can think of, then they start projecting them on characters.

CHERYL: Argh.

ARIANNA: So they're like, "Oh, well, you know Deadpool, he's schizophrenic. No, he's OCD."

SABINE: Oh, no, no.

ARIANNA: "No, he's this." And then it becomes this argument of them deciding what disability he has. Which, I've never read the Deadpool series. So I don't know if it explicitly says anything in there about anything. And then they just go on about this, diagnosing this character. And I'm like, "This is why I need to do this project!"

CHERYL: Yes.

ARIANNA: It's really interesting, as somebody who's studying it. But on a level of you thinking that this is totally OK for you to diagnose somebody if it doesn't say it at all in any of the books, then it's just kind of like, OK, this is getting really awkward. Change the subject.

CHERYL: Wow. Man, if I coulda been a fly on the wall with my video camera and microphone, while you did those.

ARIANNA: [laughs]

CHERYL: That's amazing.

SABINE: And right, when we queer something, it's like ah, wouldn't it be super hot if Top Gun was super gay? But when we crip something, it's like, "There's something fucked up about Deadpool. He must be Autistic."

CHERYL: Yeah, something wrong.

ARIANNA: Mmhmm.

SABINE: Something's not clicking for me, or I have to explain this problematic behavior. So I'm gonna read this this way. That switch makes me so uncomfortable.

CHERYL: Yeah, well, it's what you talked about, about it not being recognized as desirable. Whereas, those of us in crip community are like, "I'm not finding what's undesirable here."

SABINE: In the context of your question about mutants, it's offensive to say the definition of mutation in this whole X-Men conversation or whatever mutant teen superhero conversation--there's so many--is it's all crip language.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

SABINE: And at that point, I think the adamant misrecognizing and dis-identification with cripness on the part of people who are like, "Well, I wanna see myself in these comic books," like yes. And there are explicit references being made here that might, for the first time, allow a disabled reader to see themselves in a comic book. And so don't touch that [laughs]! Put it down!

CHERYL: Right!

SABINE: I have very little experience with superhero comics. As a blind lady, I get kinda bitchy about what visual culture I'll take in. I try not to read comic books by men cuz there are a lot of great comic books not by men. And I really don't like reading comic books that are in color, especially the way superhero comics look, is just too much for me. The saturated, the pages are just too full, I know I'm missing tons of information, the print is too small. I don't really think I need adaptive comic books necessarily. What I need is just the feeling of being able to pick up a book by an artist who's set a page up in a way that I get. It's so satisfying to me.

And so I've never really engaged with superhero comic books because they are all that incredibly over-colored--to me--visually overwhelming mess that I just can't parse. I find that work that's made in black and white is much more legible to me. I can move around the page in a much freer way, regardless of my blindness and how it's manifesting in terms of interacting with a visual object.

CHERYL: Mmhmm. E.T. Russian.

SABINE: Yeah, yes!

ARIANNA: Yeah, so good!

SABINE: Yeah, their work is so fun for me to engage with. I totally love it.

CHERYL: It has those qualities you're talking about, but it's not like oh, here's a watered-down comic because it's not super-saturated and overfilled. It just is great as it is.

SABINE: I think E.T.'s work is a really good example of what is really exciting to me about comics, which is that they, like animation, I think when it's really good, they provide a space to play with bodies and play with known forms and construct them in ways that are not understood as physically possible, physically probable, desirable, whatever. It's a way to play with monsters and shapes and how unrecognizable can you make a recognizable body or object or form? That kind of play, to me, goes so hand in hand with cripness and a desirable crip body. And I get very excited about folks that are really willing to push those boundaries in sort of constrained aesthetic spaces, like E.T.'s, like looking at a black and white comic and saying, "I can read this, and what's going on is bizarre and is really using this space in a really effective way."

ARIANNA: Also, what I love about E.T.'s work is that the comic book or the creation is this investigation--internal and external--and it's writing down that process, or it's getting that information down or that investigation down. And it's very much experimental and figuring out OK, well, this works. But this doesn't work here, and that's OK. There's such a personal level of information in the work that is very easily communicated to somebody who's sitting down with the book or comics or the zine and just flipping through it and really investing in just a single page. I think that's something that's really beautiful and is a great example of all amazing crip comics and information.

CHERYL: Yeah. Is there anything else that I haven't brought up or asked you that you wanna say or ask each other?

Archiving and Finding the Artists' Work

SABINE: Arianna, I get really excited about archives, and I think they're a necessary construction. We want them. How would you know if something is good if it's not in an archive? But I get so excited about other people rebuilding and editing and sort of setting boundaries around canons. That curatorial work

is so exciting to me, and it's such a cool, living, ongoing process. I'm so excited to know that you're doing it.

ARIANNA: I am really adamant in, at this point in my life, saying that I am an artist, but I do not draw or illustrate. And so it's really exciting for me, as somebody who loves all things comic books, and adding different narratives and pedagogy to comic books, specifically within education. I think that it's really interesting approaching a project like this, where it's archiving and getting people together and building a community. Even though there is a community of people making crip comics, but having a hub where these people can all get together and have conversations, and works can interact with each other, and then taking that a step even further and using that material as curriculum or as information or educational material for people within universities or academic institutions. So it's been really interesting to learn more about illustrators and comic creators and zine makers and the people that are actually making these stories or writing down their experiences. It's been really exciting to work with them because I don't know. I do my part in bringing people together and archiving these things, and I'm really excited about interacting with everybody else and all the other artists. So Sabine, you're amazing!

SABINE: [chuckles]

ARIANNA: I've checked out some of your work. And we'll definitely be having a conversation in the near future. I just am super excited about all the things that you're doing and your articles. It's really exciting to know that there's artists out there that are not afraid to put their experiences down and that are actively trying to engage with people around a subject matter that sometimes makes people feel uncomfortable. But it's doing the work to educate people and definitely doing it in your own terms, which I absolutely love.

SABINE: That's so kind! That's so nice! And it's been so exciting to speak with you and to know that there are so many levels at which artistic collaboration happen. To come back to access, access materials give us the opportunity to make and remake the same work so many times and to really--to use the language of art and social practice--it is a social practice to make and remake art that we deem valuable, useful to our communities, important. I think that's so exciting. You can find my work at MichaelSabine.com.

CHERYL: You sell your zines in store-type stores too, right?

SABINE: Oh, yeah. My zine about ableist microaggressions is available for purchase at Powell's Books and Reading Frenzy in Portland.

CHERYL: I bought my copy at Reading Frenzy.

SABINE: Oh! I'm so glad!

CHERYL: Wait. Is that the one with the spoons bending on the cover? Yes.

SABINE: Yes. People come up to me. Zine events are so stressful. I love making zines, but then you have to go be in public with whoever's in public, and they're talking to you about your work. I'm not embarrassed. I'm just embarrassed for whoever's gonna ask me the wrong thing.

CHERYL: [laughs]

SABINE: That's mean. I'm mean. No, but none of my zines have cover text on them. They just have graphic images. The piece about microaggressions just has spoons bending, which I think is great. Some

people pick it up and totally get my secret code, which is always like, I love a secret code. But some people will be like, "Is this about telepathy?" I'm like, "Ugh, man, witchy dude. We are not. I don't wanna do this with you right now."

ARIANNA: [laughs]

CHERYL: You just bent my spoon [laughs].

SABINE: My last one! And now it's just knives. We talk about knives all the time, too.

CHERYL: Oh yeah. [Have you seen my knives shirt](#), Arianna?

ARIANNA: Yeah, I'm ordering mine as soon as I get my first paycheck.

CHERYL: Oh!

SABINE: Yeah! Yes!

CHERYL: "No more spoons. Only knives left." Oh! And Arianna, tell folks where they can find your work and your different projects.

ARIANNA: You can find my work at [AriannaWarner.com](#), and there will be a website soon for the Institute for Crip Comics. It'll all be connected through my personal website.

It'll be more updated in the near future, but yes, people can connect to the various websites from my personal artist page.

CHERYL: Outstanding.

Wrap-up

ARIANNA: This is why it's so important, because even with a new job that's a 40-hour a week thing, it's really important to me that I continue my art practice. Doing things like this and doing interviews and talking with people gets me excited and keeps me going. As soon as I have my head on straight and have kinda figured out my new way of using my spoons in the workplace, I think, is something that's gonna be really interesting. So once I figure that out and where I can pull a couple spoons to reserve to work on my art practice, then I will be definitely contacting both of you!

SABINE: YEAH!

CHERYL: [laughs]

ARIANNA: [laughs] It's gonna be so good!

SABINE: I'm so excited. [add a pause]

CHERYL: I simply cannot thank you two enough. I thought a star would be born as soon as you two started talking, and it was.

SABINE: It was! Oh, it's such a cute star.

CHERYL: [laughs] But I do genuinely thank you so much for making the time and coming out and doing this. Thank you.

ARIANNA: Yeah, thank you so much.

SABINE: Thank you. Great to meet you!

ARIANNA: It was so good meeting you too!

SABINE: Congratulations on your new space!

CHERYL: Thanks for joining me for another episode of Stories from the brainreels. Find more handy info on brain injury and disability art and culture on my disability arts blog, WhoAmIToStopIt.com.

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