

Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 59: Comics

Guest: Ashanti Fortson and Leroy Moore

Host: Alice Wong

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For more information: <https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast/>

Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the *Disability Visibility Podcast* with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Hello, all you beautiful people! Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. Today's episode is about comics with Ashanti Fortson and Leroy Moore. Ashanti is an illustrator and cartoonist with a deep love for kind stories and fantastical settings. They're gonna talk about fantasy, space travel, queer disabled characters in comics, and the realities of working in the comics industry. Leroy Moore is the Founder of Krip-Hop Nation. He's an activist, writer, and performer. He's gonna talk about his first graphic novel published in February 2019 by Poor Press called *Krip-Hop Graphic Novel Issue 1*. Are ya ready!? Away we goooooo! [electronic beeping]

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

Introduction to Ashanti's interview and advocacy in the industry

ALICE: Ashanti, thank you so much for being on my podcast today!

ASHANTI FORSTON: Thank you for inviting me to talk to you. This is so exciting. And I love your podcast, so I'm really pumped to have the opportunity to talk with you.

ALICE: Thank you for that. Why don't you introduce yourself and share anything you'd like about your background?

ASHANTI: All right. So, my name is Ashanti Fortson. I'm a cartoonist, an illustrator. I love speculative fiction primarily and fiction that is concerned with emotions. As for my background, I'm a multi-racial Afro-Mexican person, I'm non-binary, and I'm disabled. [chuckles]

ALICE: And I think it's always exciting to see disabled folks in comics because it feels like in terms of all these conversations about diversity, especially in pop culture, it seems like the comic industry still has a long way to go in terms of disabled artists and creatives involved in the field. What's your sense of the landscape?

ASHANTI: Anyone can make comics, but there are roadblocks when disability is not actively being accounted for and accommodated within the industry. So, for example, if publishers want super, super tight deadlines, that can be prohibitive because they're not accommodating the reality of how long comics takes to do, plus how difficult it can be to navigate that as a disabled person. But it really is a matter of thinking about those problems, those needs, and setting up accommodations for it. Which I mean, that's accessibility in general is that when there are

timelines and deadlines and logistics on a publisher's side, it's just a very tricky thing to navigate.

ALICE: Yeah, I can imagine that. And it's never easy to have conversations about it, so have you ever had to tell a supervisor or a client that hey, we need to make some changes? Or are there any examples of ways you've tried to advocate for yourself?

ASHANTI: I'm very grateful that the people I've worked with have been very kind and understanding. My specific disability experience is I have Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and Fibromyalgia, which can make it really tough to get work done. I work on a timeline, and I do my best to pace it all out, plan it all out, make sure that I have a buffer so that if I get sick, if I do have a flare up, I can still hit that deadline. So, that's been an important thing on my end, is making sure that I'm planning for the worst a little bit with my illnesses and doing as much as I can to prevent having to talk to people about needing accommodations. But there have definitely been cases where even all that planning wasn't enough; illnesses, they got me, and life happened. And I was communicative with my editors, and again, I'm grateful that my editors have been receptive to it and understanding and accommodating. I've been able to get deadline extensions for projects through that, which has been a really big help. It's amazing how much, "Yeah, don't worry," how much that can do to relieve the sort of existential stress.

ALICE: Yeah. I think a lotta folks who still struggle with identifying as disabled, much less disclosing, it's a really big deal. And it's somewhat scary and really a stressor because it is a big deal to be able to make a living as an artist.

ASHANTI: Yeah. I think that it's always a long journey and sometimes a rocky road. But through my time in comics, I've definitely run up against challenges, both internal challenges where I have trouble doing the work sometimes. I work full-time freelance, and that means that sometimes I have days where I can't work, and I just lie in bed and rest. And that can be, that's definitely an internal challenge that has consequences tangibly that I have to learn how to navigate. But the comics sharing, discussing spheres are online, which makes it certainly more accessible than just conventions in physical spaces.

ALICE: Mmhmm. Speaking of barriers or just ways of breaking in, you mentioned conventions and these kinda large events in terms of accessibility. What are some other structural changes that you see could really help not only yourself but other disabled artists in terms of just those who want to be in comics?

ASHANTI: I think that's a really good question, and I think it's a really big question. I think that I would love for editors in publishing houses, whether they be sort of large-scale or small press or somewhere in between, as well as illustration art directors, I would love in an ideal world for there to be more flexibility and understanding with regards to deadlines. I think that is a really big part of why it's difficult to be a professional illustrator or cartoonist or comic artist when you're disabled especially is, deadlines can be really tough. And sometimes people have really short deadlines, and that can be very, very challenging even without a disability just to make those deadlines when they're on a rush. I'm sure that there are a lot of disabled comic artists out there, whether they identify as disabled or whether they don't know or they're not there yet. However they experience their identities in the world, I think there are a lot of people who have trouble asking for help.

So, I do want there to be more of a dialogue within the community to bring awareness to the fact that asking for help and being communicative about your experiences and your difficulties and the accommodations you need is, it's important. Or/and an understanding in the community

within artists that they should be able to ask for help, and they should be able to reach out to their editors and talk about these things. Whether disabled or non-disabled, to recognize that it's important to value your health and to take care of yourself as much as you can, professionally. And in the way that that links to health, both mental, physical, emotional, because if you don't advocate for yourself through your editors to your clients, it's unlikely that someone else can advocate for you. And that's rough. That's tough.

[ethereal ambient music break]

Having to prove ourselves and making it as a freelance illustrator

ALICE: I feel like a lotta times, we're our own worst enemy, you know. Like things build up internally, or we have imposter syndrome.

ASHANTI: Yeah.

ALICE: Or feel the need to always top the next project, do one better, and to always feel like you have to prove yourself, which it's not a weakness to ask for help. But that these kinds of things are gonna be healthy for the entire workforce, the entire community, not just people with disabilities.

ASHANTI: Completely. And I think that's a really good point, all of that. And I'm thinking about the ways that we are our worst enemy sometimes. I think artists, all sorts of creators absolutely go through that, the creative version of imposter syndrome, which can show up in so many places. But something that I've struggled with a lot is if I don't make myself, if I don't push through and make myself work, make myself hit this deadline, and if it's not perfect, then I'm not good enough. And also, I can't ask for help because that would be admitting defeat and weakness or something. And I know that it's not true, but it's so easy to fall into that when the industry, sort of abstracted in that way, wants you to be a perfect working machines, and you're not.

ALICE: And I think that's why, in a lot of ways, social media has been so powerful for all kinds of groups, but especially artists, especially beginning artists who are just trying to build a profile and trying to get their work out there. But also, really kinda give the real talk and share what it's really like to be a freelance illustrator or a freelance comics cartoonist.

ASHANTI: Something else that social media has done is, jumping off of artists making their own platforms, there are definitely artists who have, through their art, built up such a demand for their work just from people who enjoy their work that they're able to really work for themselves truly and set up their own subscription services and sell their own comics that they just decide to make and really be in charge of their own work and their own schedule like that, and I would say most artists can easily do. But social media is making it easier to take control of. I'm so grateful that the Internet has made it possible for me to have the foot in the door in the career that I have so far.

[mellow music break]

Talking about setting the work in space and highlighting queer representation

ALICE: So, a lot of your work is about space and is set in space and a lot of speculative fiction and fantasy. What do you love about space and telling stories that are set clearly in another world, another time, another dimension? What's the power of fantasy in your mind?

ASHANTI: I think with space, space is one of my favorite settings because there is so much that can happen in space, and there's so much that can exist in space. It's infinite. It's limitless. And in our real world, we don't have a lot of knowledge about what's out there and the ever-present questions of is there other life and all of these sort of scientific questions that can very quickly become existential questions. And I think existentialism is really what I love about space. I like to use space as almost a battleground for emotions, and there are, in space, there's so many different angles that can be taken with feelings. I did a stand-alone comic called *smallness* that's 30 pages, and it follows a young engineer who was fired from her dream job and falls into this deep depression and is trying to avoid all of her feelings in this space fantasy setting. And there are a lot of feelings of isolation, I think, that are well-reflected in a space setting or via a space setting. But at the same time, feelings of vibrancy and love and companionship and understanding can also be in space because there's just, there's so much. And thinking about the types of people who are all over the place in a space fantasy setting, how many different kinds of people? How many different experiences and lives and worlds? It's such a rich tapestry of possibility, of emotional possibility, and representation of possibility as well. Like there's also, there's so much opportunity to show the real diversity and the real experiences of different kinds of humans.

And I think that one of the things I like about working in the setting of space is that I can just do whatever I want. If I want to write about disability, I'm gonna do that, and no one can stop me. If I wanna write about women of color going on an adventure, I'm gonna do that, you know. No one can stop me. And that's the case with all media, but I think space really, for me, it presented an exciting opportunity to just go nuts.

ALICE: Well, yeah. And also, I think like in queer relationships and queer love and queer representation, that's also really important too, in your web comic *GALANTHUS* and *smallness* as well are queer stories. And tell me a little bit about queer representation.

ASHANTI: Absolutely. And I think that's—thank you so much for bringing that up because—that's, it's so true. I think that in fantasy, it's a canvas for us to challenge our preconceived notions about our world, I think, through a fantasy world. Because those experiences of queerness and disability, they exist in our world, but through fantasy, we can just say, you know, there is no...this is not other. This is exactly what it is, and everyone sees it and everyone's cool with it. Or you know, like it provides creators with—and readers—with the ability to dictate the rules. And as a queer person, as a disabled person, I think that really means a lot to me. I like having that power to say yeah, everyone here is queer, and it's not unusual and it's not abnormal and it's not noteworthy. It doesn't have to be a thing. We don't have to have an episode dedicated to homophobia. We don't have to. There are no constraints. I can just show these experiences and these characters and their love for each other in all these different ways. I can just put that on the table and leave it there.

And the same with disability, different ways of experiencing the world. I want to be able to just put that out there and have these characters have those experiences, and it's not, they're not questioned or interrogated about it, and they're not judged for it and they're not seen as Other for it. I think that's a power that fantasy has, is we cut all the ties to the reality of living in our world as X identity and sort of all the baggage that can come with that. And we get to see not necessarily an idealized experience, but we get to see perhaps an experience or a set of experiences that aren't loaded with that baggage necessarily. I just wanna see queer folk that look like me and experience the world like me and who look like my friends. I just wanna see them having space adventures.

ALICE: Mhmm. Yeah. I think that for me also, hopefully the hope is that our lives, our stories told within this context will make it more accessible for a lot of people who may have never really understood the lived experience of queerness or of disability. So, I think there's also that other kind of potential of fantasy.

ASHANTI: Yeah. And on that point, I think there's especially a lot of potential for that in a lot of kids' comics: young readers, middle-grade comics, young-adult comics. And that's where a lot of graphic novels are being published, in those age ranges. And that's such a perfect place to start normalizing our experiences.

ALICE: I'm ready to live in space! I'm just so ready. You know, Ashanti, let's get into our little flying saucer, and we can take off 'cause my bags are packed. I'm ready.

ASHANTI: Yeah, I agree.

BOTH: [laugh]

Wrap-up to Ashanti's interview

ASHANTI: Thank you so much for inviting me to talk with you on here. It's really great, and I really appreciate it so much with you out there.

ALICE: Absolutely. OK. Well, thank you again so much, Ashanti!

ASHANTI: Thank you so much, Alice.

[bouncy music break]

Introduction to Leroy's interview and Krip Hop Nation

ALICE: OK. So, Leroy, thank you so much for being on my podcast today.

LEROY MOORE: Yeah, thank you for having me!

ALICE: So, Leroy, why don't you introduce yourself.

LEROY: All right. So, Leroy Moore. I live in Berkeley now. I used to live in San Francisco before the dot com. [chuckles] I used to live in San Francisco from '91 to 2000, but I was born in Buffalo, New York, the coldest place on earth. I lived in New York, lived in Connecticut. I'm a Black disabled activist, poet, author, and founder of Krip Hop Nation. And yeah, and I'm also a journalist from *POOR* Magazine, yeah.

ALICE: And for people who are not familiar with Krip Hop Nation, can you describe kind of what it is and the movement the cultural work?

LEROY: Yeah. So, Krip Hop started almost like 11 years ago. Krip Hop with a K. It's really an activist movement around Hip Hop and other music around disability, disability justice. We lean on what Patty Berne started. And Krip Hop is really trying to say that people with disabilities have always been in the music industry since the Blues. So, we really wanna say that Hip Hop is no different. It's artists with disabilities. So, yeah, 11 years. We've toured around the UK, South Africa, Canada. We've put out three CDs so far. We got chapters all over Africa, Spain, UK, Canada.

Krip-Hop Graphic Novel Volume 1

ALICE: So, it's 2019 during this interview right now, and you just came out with a graphic novel called *Krip-Hop Graphic Novel Volume 1*. So, tell me about the origins of this project.

LEROY: Well, it's so interesting because the origin of the project is that I've always wanted to, like I said, twist Hip Hop, and to say that we were there at the beginning in the '70s on the street corners of the Bronx. You know, I remember taking Greyhound from Connecticut to New York and going to the cyphers. We were there. And I think this graphic novel is totally different from other comics or novels that have a particular disability but don't really go deeper into the story. So, the graphic novel really goes deep into the story. It has Kase 2 in it, and Kase 2 was a graffiti artist, a one-armed graffiti artist back in the last '70s. So, it's more than just a graphic novel. It really tells the history of people with disabilities that were there in the beginning.

[mellow music break]

So, I wanted to really have a brown disabled young lady as a superhero because you don't really see that, you know, especially in Hip Hop. It's a male-driven arena, so you really don't see brown disabled women. So, I thought I'd put a brown disabled woman into the main character and named her Roxanne.

ALICE: And obviously, there are famous Roxannes in Hip Hop.

LEROY: Exactly, exactly.

ALICE: And was that a choice that you made on purpose?

LEROY: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I really love The Real Roxanne. I grew up on her.

ALICE: That's like history. This is like old-school nods to the legends, right?

LEROY: Exactly, exactly. Yeah, because I wanted to go back to the old-school and really say that people with disabilities were there, you know. Just like the Blues, people with disabilities were there. So, that's one reason why I named her Roxanne.

ALICE: And tell me about Roxanne because she's a major character in your group, but it's also a character that interacts with a younger Leroy.

LEROY: Yeah.

ALICE: I think of you two as the main characters. But tell me about Roxanne. Because she's a fictional character versus your character, which is kind of more autobiographical.

LEROY: Mhmm.

ALICE: Tell me: who is she? Where is she from?

LEROY: Yeah. She's a little Black girl in New York growing up. She's an activist. She wants to get involved, and her mother tells her about the old New York and Hip Hop when it was back on the streets. And she's just really into it, but she doesn't see herself until she goes to the computer and finds Krip Hop. And it changes her whole life, you know. From there, her confidence builds up, and because her confidence is building up, her wheelchair turns into Hip Hop. So, her wheelchair turns into a record player, and she has a arm to do art. So, as her

confidence builds, she really gets her power, and she goes throughout the city. And anywhere she goes, there's a crowd around her, and they do a little cypher. And it's so funny because when she goes around the city, she's noisy. She has music playing. And this is today's New York, so I'm playing with the gentrification of New York because people are calling the police on her. And the police can't catch her because her wheelchair is so fast.

ALICE: And does this power also give her the power to time travel?

LEROY: Exactly, exactly. And then she goes back to me in 1979, and she shows me my history of Krip Hop. So, she has a folder of all that she pulled down from the Internet, and she shows me my teacher.

ALICE: And what do you like about the style of a graphic novel in terms of just a story that you wanna tell?

LEROY: You know, this is my first time doing a picture book, a graphic book. And I think doing that, it shows people, the character more, the place of New York, back in the past and now. You know, the reason why I wanted to do it really is that I wanted to show that people with disabilities were there in the beginning. Because really, you look at Hip Hop history and all the books, there's no mention around disability. So, that's the main reason why I wanted to do it and wanted to say that no, we were here. The thing that's break dancing called *Breakin'*, when you see that film, there's a artist on crutches, and that was a real artist, that we were there in the beginning.

[chill music break]

Collaborators on the book and unexpected surprises

ALICE: And let's talk a little bit about the people you collaborated with for this book. You supplied the text, and all the illustrations are by Asian Robles.

LEROY: Yeah.

ALICE: And tell me about how you two worked together to really build a compelling story with both text and images.

LEROY: Yeah. Asian Robles is a wonderful visual artist in Oakland. During the day, he works in a restaurant, but during the night, he does his visual arts. So, and Asian Robles had worked with other *POOR Magazine* authors like Tiny and other authors, so he goes down in history with *POOR Magazine*. So, how we work together: I had this story all written out, so I gave him the story. And he just went back and draw the pieces, you know. We went back and forth around the pieces, but he really got the story.

ALICE: Yeah, and was it surprising in terms of like you probably had a idea of what it would look like, but when you see an artist interpret it, it must be really surprising. So, what did you love about it that you did not expect?

LEROY: Oh, I loved the City of New York back then. Outside of Roxanne's window is a sign that says, "Gentrification" on it, and it's like a billboard sign right outside. So, I really liked that. What I was excited about was that he brought in different pieces of New York that I didn't know that he knew like Apollo Theater. The cover has "Apollo" on it, *The Village Voice*, a wonderful newspaper that used to be in New York, brought in the poetry café that was really a good poetry café in Brooklyn, I think. Seeing those things really brought me back. And seeing me on the

Greyhound bus, that's like, oh my god. I put in so many hours on Greyhound, going from Connecticut to New York, you know. Just seeing me walking with my walker, oh my god. You know, seeing me at 51, seeing me as a little kid with my walker, and I used to walk all over New York with my walker! It's like, I can't believe I did that.

ALICE: Did you send him photos of what you looked like as a kid, or did he just kind of go with it?

LEROY: I had only one photo, so he went with the photo that I had. That photo didn't have my walker.

ALICE: And he got the details right.

LEROY: Yeah, he totally got it right.

ALICE: That's amazing 'cause I think a lotta artists still don't know really how to draw people who use mobility devices and assistive technology.

LEROY: Exactly, exactly.

ALICE: So, I wanna talk about the cover of the graphic novel because it's really dynamic. There's a lot going on.

LEROY: Yeah.

The graphic novel cover

ALICE: So, for people who haven't seen the cover yet, can you describe it and tell me why you wanted this as the first thing people see?

LEROY: Yeah. The cover of the book is, I think, is trying to set up the book. That's how people are gonna pick it up. So, the reason why I did the cover: the cover is Roxanne, and she's just getting down in her wheelchair. And it's a semicircle around her with Hip Hop, Black and brown artists just looking on just like in shock. And there's a character that Roxanne's mom tells her at night is like, "You will see this elderly man with a short arm." And he watches over Brooklyn and New York, and he's one of the first Hip Hop artists. So, her mother's like, "See? There's disabled people in Hip Hop, even back then." So, that person that's in the cover with the New York Yankee hat on, that's Rob Da' Noize Temple. And Rob Da' Noize Temple is a real person. He lives in Brooklyn. He has a short arm, and he's been in music since the early '70s. And he's also the DJ of the Sugarhill Gang, and he's one of the co-founders of Krip Hop. So, I wanted him to be in the cover because he is New York. He grew up in New York, so he's in the cover. And there's other Black and brown men that just are shocked that Roxanne is just going off, you know. So, yeah, that's the cover. It's colorful. It's all different colors. The wheelchair is totally amped up, and so yeah.

ALICE: There's a lotta energy, I think, in that photo.

LEROY: Yeah.

ALICE: I mean in the cover, not the photo, the illustration. And I feel like that's definitely the vibe that you're expressing throughout the graphic novel. What do you think is some of the major themes of your story?

LEROY: Yeah, exactly. It's just that, you know? I wanted to say that Hip Hop, these people with disabilities were there in the beginning. The foreword of the book is done by a Black kid. She's only 11 years old, and she wrote this gorgeous foreword. She got the book. She was so excited about having the book come out. I just wanted to have a graphic novel comic out there that deals with Hip Hop that has a Black woman artist, a woman character, as the main character and really challenging the early disability field around ableism. My character, Black young boys that were in the cypher would tell me, "Oh, because you're disabled, you'll just sit out here and just look for the cops." And that really happened. So, also I wanted to share the ableism in early Hip Hop that was there, you know? That's why I say this is more than a graphic novel. It's a whole education.

ALICE: Leroy, thank you so much for sharing this story, and I just wish you all the best with it.

LEROY: Yeah, thank you.

Wrap-up

[hip hop plays]

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the *Disability Visibility Project*, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find out more about Ashanti's and Leroy's work on my website.

The audio producer for this episode is Sarika D. Mehta. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets! Byeee!!

♪ Knees up toes down
My stance get as low as you would if you were my sweat pants
How far will they go?
Oh, yeah, yeah
How far will they go?
Oh, yeah, yeah ♪