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The Tokyo Paralympic Superhero: Manga and Narratives of Disability in Japan

Anoma van der Veere

Abstract

The Paralympic Games are founded on ideals of inclusivity and diversity for people with a disability. Consequently, there is an emphasis on athlete empowerment within the Paralympic Movement. One consistent criticism of the idea of athlete empowerment is that it relies on the concept of the ‘supercrip’, narratives of overcoming the tragedy of one’s disability through superhero-like qualities. The role of society is largely left out. This article shows that such narratives are prevalent in discourses surrounding the upcoming Tokyo 2020 Games, specifically in popular culture products designed to promote the Paralympic Games. This is problematic because such narratives individualize disability, rather than address larger social issues that people with a disability face in Japan.

Paralympic values and Tokyo 2020

Although the main attraction to the Paralympic Games (PG) is the participation of disabled athletes, its value lies in its link with discourses of diversity and inclusivity, as the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), the organizing body of the PG states:

Diversity is a reality. Inclusion is a choice. The IPC chooses to lead on this issue because only by accounting for and benefitting from difference will we continue to grow and sustain the Paralympic Movement. [...] Diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups making up a society. It is essential to ensure harmonious interaction between people and to ensure social justice.

(IPC 2017)

The IPC creates a connection between itself and these lofty goals by formulating these ideals within the context of the organization’s main activity, organizing disability sports. These goals are strengthened by a set of ‘Paralympic values’ that form the basis of the IPC’s mission: courage, determination, inspiration, and equality. (IPC 2014) Accordingly, the “reputation and publicity campaigns of the Paralympic Movement revolve largely around its role of empowering those with disabilities” (2009, 653). So how has this discourse of empowerment affected the promotion of the Tokyo 2020 Games?

The Japanese organizing committees have embraced the IPC’s position, and emulated these principles in its publicity campaigns for the upcoming Games. This is evident in the Tokyo 2020 slogan ‘Unity in Diversity’, as well as its marketing in public spaces around Tokyo (see for example image 1).



Image 1. Photo (author) taken on the Tokyo Metro Ginza line in 2018.

The promotional poster in image 1 depicts parents with children, and two wheelchair

users. The main focus, however, is the wheelchair rugby player in front of an elevator. This poster tries to convey a picture of accessibility, connecting it to the 2020 Games by placing the athlete front and center. In reality, these types of wheelchairs are unfit for outdoor use. Nor do they actually fit through the doors of metro station elevators because of their widened base. The poster is therefore not portraying a realistic situation. In fact, by framing disability in this way, the organizing committees responsible for this poster are duplicating in toto common misrepresentations that already exist within Paralympic discourses.

One reason this wholesale duplication can be problematic is that athletes with a disability within the Paralympic Movement are consistently presented as so-called 'supercrips'. Supercrips, as Berger puts it, are:

[...] those individuals whose inspirational stories of courage, dedication, and hard work prove that it can be done, that one can defy the odds and accomplish the impossible. The concern is that these stories of success will foster unrealistic expectations about what people with disabilities can achieve, what they should be able to achieve if only they tried hard enough. Society does not need to change. It is the myth of the self-made man (2004, 798).

This way of presenting athletes with a disability remains dominant. Coverage of the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games, for example, was completely unbalanced and focused on creating an image of Paralympic athletes as "superheroes", while simultaneously setting "unrealistic expectations for the vast majority of disabled people". The media also completely failed to engage with larger social problems such as employment, welfare, and socio-economic destitution (Kirakosyan and Osmar Seabra Junior 2018, 144). Similarly, disabled activists in the United Kingdom have expressed their cynicism of how disability was framed in

the media during the London 2012 Games (Braye, Dixon and Gibbons 2013, 991).

In order to construct this narrative of the supercrip, the "heroic Paralympian", authors fall back on representations of athletes as the "pitiful cripple" (Peers 2009, 654). In order to become the hero, one first has to struggle with tragedy and loss. The media depoliticizes the everyday challenges and struggles of disabled people through such framing, simply focusing on disability as a "personal misfortune" (Shakespeare 1994, 284). The athlete is presented as heroic simply because they can perform feats that are normally considered impossible for those with a disability (Misener 2012, 347). Disability becomes an individual problem and society holds no responsibility. Regretfully, such representations only function to further disenfranchise those who are actually in the game of pursuing social change (Purdue and Howe 2012, 915).

Moreover, the most celebrated Paralympic athletes are those who have successfully adapted mobility technologies, who have adopted the cyborg body in the pursuit of athletic excellence, and who through their visual dominance in the coverage of disability sports in the media disempower those who are not able to, or are not willing to, "take advantage of the explicit use of technology" (Howe 2011, 875, 879). The disempowerment of those who do not make use of mobility technologies is not the only disadvantage.

Clearly, there is a strong disconnect between what Paralympians represent and the everyday lived experience of disabled persons. Stereotyping disability within the context of elite sports performance only serves to exacerbate this sentiment (Brittain and Beacom 2016, 515). It is within the space of this disconnect that the media play an essential role in constructing how disability is perceived among its consumers, and in society as a whole (Pappous, Marcellinin and de Léséleuc 2011,

346, Misener 2012, 348). Most existing studies are, however, predominantly Eurocentric. To avoid sweeping generalizations of how disability is framed in Japan in the run-up to the Tokyo 2020 PG, it is necessary to take a deeper look at how Japanese media have portrayed disability.

Japan, Disability, and the Media

Largely due to social expectations of productivity and reproduction that have stereotypically excluded those with a disability people with a disability in Japan remained largely “invisible” both in society and in the media up until the 1990s (Stibbe 2004, 23). These expectations have led to a form of paternalism, meaning that “people with disabilities [...] will never be seen as fully fledged adults (*ichininmae*)” (Stevens 2013, 161). Moreover, media narratives continuously frame disability as a deficiency, a medical condition that makes a person highly vulnerable, and usually the victim of some kind of tragedy or loss. This is problematic, as it turns disability wholly into an individual issue, obviating the role of society, and placing the responsibility of any impairment on the person themselves (Valentine 2001, 711).

The media play a large role in sustaining this notion, but this image of disability is widespread and crosses into various parts of life. A glaring example of this is the collection of empirical data by the Japanese government concerning disabled people. There is a strong emphasis on information gathering from people with a physical disability, while those who fall outside of this range also fall outside of the data gathering mechanisms of the state. This is a bias that trickles down into public policy. Those who have an intellectual or psychiatric disability are considered more ‘difficult’ to define and therefore assumed to be less likely to fully participate in Japanese society (Stevens 2013, 42). They are therefore less interesting

when it comes to data collection. Again, participating in Japanese society in this sense is conflated with meeting social expectations and economic productivity (Stevens 2013, 28)

This emphasis on physically disabled persons in public policy is also reflected in representation choices in the media. In a study of Japanese television drama it is shown that the most commonly depicted disabled persons were wheelchair users, with intellectually disabled persons coming in a far second (Saito and Ishiyama 2005, 443). One effect of this hierarchy of disability is that, in media narratives, the individualized ‘problem’ of disability is usually solved by a heroic narrative in which the person turns “the tragic story around” (Valentine 2001, 711). This means that rather than society adapting to meet the needs of those with a disability, the persons themselves need to find ways in which to meet existing social expectations. This tragic hero, ‘supercrip’, narrative, mirrors current representations of Paralympians. It will be interesting to look at media developments in relation to the Tokyo 2020 Games, and see if the same issues still persist.

Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games and Popular Culture

A flurry of visual media have been produced in the form of anime (animation), manga (comics), and magazines for the promotion of the Games to promote the upcoming Tokyo 2020 Games. Focusing specifically on the PG, the national television network NHK has aired several anime episodes that depict athletes practicing their respective Paralympic sports. (NHK 2020) For example, the Ani X Para series revolves around several athletes all aiming to compete in 2020, and is accompanied by the slogan “Who is your hero?” (*anata no hīrō wa dare desu ka?*). Similarly, special issues of manga have been produced featuring disabled athletes as the central characters: Paralympic

Jump (pararinpikku jampu), or PJ (see image 2-4).



Image 2-4. Paralympic Jump vol. 1-3.
Shueisha, 2017-2019.

The PJ has broad support within the community of organizations involved in the Tokyo 2020 Games with the colophon listing the organizing committees of the Olympic and Paralympic Games, the Japanese Para-Sports Association, the Japan Paralympic Committee, the Nippon Foundation Paralympic Support Centre, and many sport-specific disability sports associations. Because the PJ enjoys such broad support, and because manga are a highly visible medium in Japan that can “potentially sway” perceptions of disability among its readers (Gottlieb 2001, 991), this article further explores how the narratives of disability are constructed through this medium.

The Paralympic Jump and Narratives of Disability

The first volume of the Paralympic Jump was released in 2017, followed by the second and third volumes published in 2018 and 2019. They are only available in Japanese. Reading the manga follows the rules of Japanese as well, starting on the top right corner, reading to the left, and then following this pattern up until the lower left corner. The structure of the PJ itself is similar to other editions of the Shōnen Jump series. They contain chapters written by

different authors, with a single narrative spread out over multiple volumes.

The fact that the PJ is a separate edition is a clear indication that Paralympic sports are not considered part of mainstream sports, and thus not part of regular manga works. One notable exception is a manga series called REAL. This popular manga written by Inoue Takehiko is about wheelchair basketball and features several young men struggling with a disability. Interestingly, the narrative presented in REAL goes against the grain in terms of representing disability. It does not focus on athletes pursuing super-human feats. Rather, it depicts and visualizes disability and explores the tougher parts of living with a disability in Japan. Finding their solace in wheelchair basketball, the plight of the main characters forces readers to “confront their own ableist attitudes and expectations that often fail to consider or “see” how things like public spaces cater to normate bodies” (Wood 2013, 648). Despite the success of this on-going serialization, and however promisingly Inoue’s name decorates the covers of all three PJ volumes, the author’s contributions are limited to interviews and a few illustrations. Nevertheless, two of the authors included in the PJ are established names in the manga industry, and are famous for sport-specific manga.

Takahashi Yōichi, an author famous for his soccer-themed Captain Tsubasa (*kyaputen tsubasa*) series, has contributed two chapters that focus on blind soccer. The story follows Rin, a woman interested in blind soccer because of her blind younger brother. She lost her younger brother in a tragic accident in which he fell from a platform at an unnamed train station (see image 5).



Image 5. Paralympic Jump volume 2. Shueisha, 2018.

Because of her little brother’s enthusiasm for blind soccer, Rin became a soccer player herself. She was quite successful until she came down with a serious injury that made her unable to continue. This is when she decided to volunteer at a blind soccer team. The story fast forwards to the present, when she meets Yūki, the star player of the team and one of the players in the Japanese national team. They start dating soon after meeting. Not to be excluded from the tragic hero narrative, Yūki introduces Rin to his mother, who is terminally ill and currently in the hospital. He laments the fact that his mother will not be able to see him play during the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics.

Yūki is the star player in his team due to his heightened sense of hearing. This is showcased in an encounter with three children on a bridge while he is on his way to a match. After one of the children runs into him, Yūki displays his hearing skills by telling the children he can “see everything, 360 degrees” (see image 6). He continues by detailing his surroundings, from the bird perched on the traffic light, to the family walking their dog under the bridge. He demonstrates his extraordinary hearing by telling one of the children that they dropped a 100 yen coin. He explains that the different

coins make a different sound, and he can tell the difference just by listening. The children, naturally, are amazed at this feat.



Image 6. Paralympic Jump volume 3. Shueisha, 2019.

Saruwatari Tetsuya, famous for his martial arts series Tough (*tafu*) and Rock Up (*rokku appu*), has contributed three chapters, one in each volume following the exploits of Fujimoto Satoshi, a judo player (*judoka*) with a visual impairment. The story starts with Fujimoto explaining his disability in a way the reader can easily understand: “About the size of the hole in this 5 yen coin is my world” (see image 7). The blacked out panels emphasize his disability, while simultaneously conveying a sense of

disorientation. This is a theme continued throughout all three chapters.

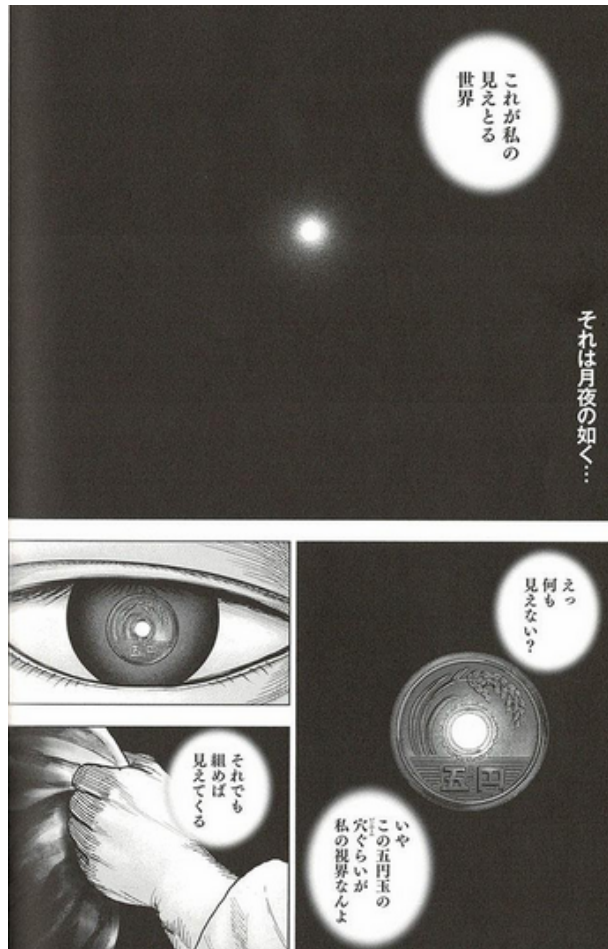


Image 7. Paralympic Jump volume 1. Shueisha, 2017.

The first chapter of Fujimoto’s story details a fight between him and a blind monk who is an expert in staff fighting (*bōjutsu*). Fujimoto has challenged the monk because of his reputation. As Fujimoto says: “even though you are blind, even non-disabled people cannot beat you” (*kenjōsha*, lit. ‘healthy person’). The monk explains his skills to Fujimoto a little earlier in the story after easily beating him the first time, telling him that: “People are made to compensate for any function they might lose. It is the same as when you lose your eyesight, your hearing, sense of smell, and sense of

touch rapidly develop” (image 8). Through perseverance and willpower, Fujimoto manages to stand up again. Ironically, the author chooses here to convey a sense of urgency and gravity in the monk’s response by drawing him with his eyes closed on a dark background, after which he opens his eyes and the background lightens up. The irony, here, being that the monk is blind, yet he has to open his eyes to ‘see’ how serious the situation has become.



Image 8. Paralympic Jump volume 1. Shueisha, 2017.

The author continues in his second chapter to draw comparisons between ability and disability by contrasting able-bodied versus disabled. Facing off with a band of hoodlums, Fujimoto stands poised to protect a helpless able-bodied person hiding behind him, telling himself: “Even someone who is blind can help a non-disabled person” (image 9). Again, the panels are almost completely blacked out. The main character is placed in a dangerous situation, and manages to summon up the courage to face the violent hoodlums threatening a helpless person on the street. In the end he manages to get away with minor

injuries after fighting the hoodlums because someone called the police to the scene. Despite his attempt to be heroic and protect the person behind him, he remains dependent on his surroundings to save him from this dangerous situation.



Image 9. Paralympic Jump volume 2. Shueisha, 2018.

The next chapter continues with Fujimoto participating in the Tokyo International Blind Judo Competition. He fights his way up to the final, where he confronts a naturalized Armenian former soldier. His teammates are scared of him, as he has consistently won every match “breaking” his opponents. Fujimoto reassures them by arguing that he “will show him the true meaning of wholesome and

magnificent Japanese judo.” Again, during the fight, Fujimoto’s thoughts are laid on display. At one point, he tells himself that it is actually because of his disability that he becomes able, as he says himself: “It is because I cannot see, that I can see” (image 10). Despite his many struggles and hard training positioned within the narrative through flashbacks, he eventually loses the final match. However, while reflecting on the fight he is pleased that he finally has a rival to compete with.



Image 10. Paralympic Jump volume 3. Shueisha, 2019.

The last athlete-centered story in the PJ is the story of Kamiji Yui, a successful wheelchair tennis player. The story was written by Fūji Hikaru and drawn by Masahiko Aoki. The first chapter starts with Kamiji as the flag bearer during the opening ceremony of the Rio 2016 Paralympics. Her family is watching her on television back in Japan, while Kamiji herself accidentally moves too fast for the rest of the athletes to catch up.

In the following flashback, her mother starts telling the story of Kamiji’s congenital disability. The story is visualized through Kamiji’s teary-eyed mother, who remembers being told that her daughter will likely be bedridden for the rest of her life. As a result “of the help of many people” and because “there was tennis” she was finally able to “get to this point”, referencing back to Kamiji being the

flag bearer for Japan in Rio.

The following chapters are recurring patterns of Kamiji facing increasingly stronger opponents, and persevering through hard training to make up for her losses. Interestingly, one particular aspect of her development is of a more material nature. At the start of the third chapter, Kamiji received a “magnesium wheelchair” from her coach. The lightness of her new wheelchair is highlighted by several frames depicting her moving at high speeds, visualized by a blurry background while she moves around (see image 11). Eventually, the focus of her training shifts from learning new tennis skills to learning to handle her new wheelchair and its weight. She finally manages to gain control over her wheelchair and successfully wins the French Open.

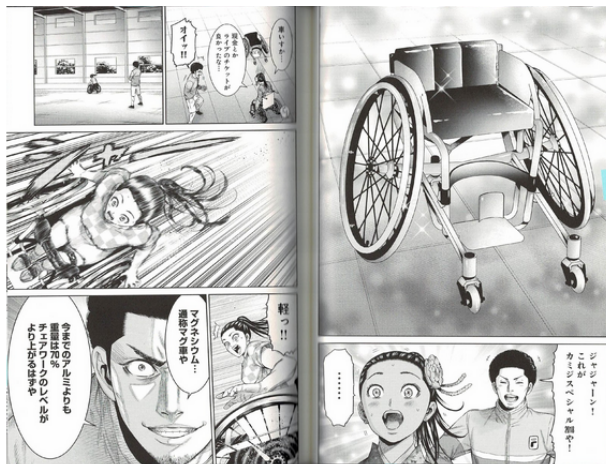


Image 11. Paralympic Jump volume 3. Shueisha, 2019.

The last chapter in each volume focuses on a different ‘supporter’. The first chapter details the history of Japanese para-ski chairs from the perspective of its Japanese maker. The second chapter details the role of a supporter learning to run as a guide for blind athletes. Similar in structure, the latest installment of this series follows the story of Teranishi Masato, a PE teacher who becomes increasingly passionate

about blind swimming after taking a job at a blind school. The story is based on the real person. A few interesting points arise during this chapter, one of which is the portrayal of Teranishi’s key role in the development of blind swimmers, in particular Kawai Junichi.

Throughout Kawai’s Paralympic career, Teranishi was forced to be an onlooker due to strict staff rules. However, as he tells himself: “I want to be the tapper for the athletes that I myself have raised” (see image 12). The importance of his role is visualized through his position behind the athletes in the top frames, literally pushing them forward. When he is finally able to be at Kawai’s side during the Athens Paralympic Games, he rejoices in his position. At the 50-meter freestyle race, close ups emphasizing his centrality are supplemented by his personal comments. He tells himself that even the slightest mistake can have great effects, stating that “everything is in my hands” (see image 13). After Kawai’s successful race, Teranishi proudly exclaims: “We won gold!! You did well Kawai!!” (see image 14). Interestingly, despite Kawai being one of the most successful Paralympic swimmers in the world, currently also serving as the chairman of the Japan Paralympic Committee, his role within this narrative is marginal.



Image 12. Paralympic Jump volume 3. Shueisha, 2019.

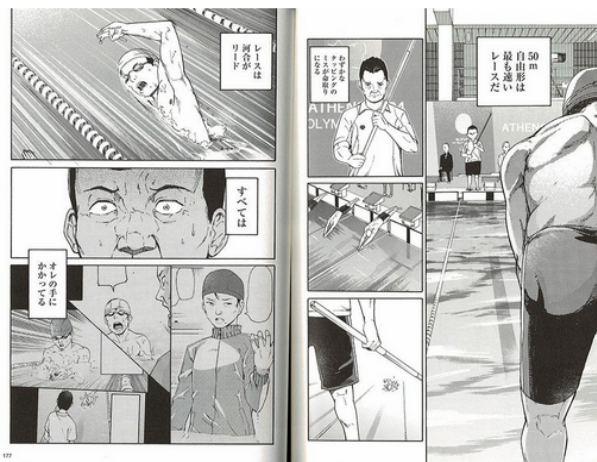


Image 13. Paralympic Jump volume 3. Shueisha, 2019.



Image 14. Paralympic Jump volume 3. Shueisha, 2019.

Although Teranishi's continuous effort to promote para-swimming and support athletes is commendable, the centrality of his figure in the career of one of the most successful Paralympic athletes Japan has ever seen raises questions. The idea that Teranishi has 'raised' his athletes borders on the paternalistic, and the dominant focus on his activities simultaneously marginalizes the efforts of the depicted athletes. This is, simply stated, a disempowering discourse. As Peers has pointed out, Paralympic discourses predominantly focus "on the decisions, actions and sacrifices of the volunteers, experts and institutions of empowerment" and thereby marginalize "athletes' actions and voices [...] leaving disabling discourses uncontested" (Peers 2009, 658). This narrative reinforces the notion that it are the non-disabled professionals "who make good decisions for the good of disabled people in sport" (Braye 2016, 1289).

This perspective is communicated more subtly to readers in the blind soccer narrative. The story is about blind soccer, yet the central figure is the volunteer, Rin. Her position and connection to blind soccer is legitimized through her disabled younger brother. The tragic loss of her brother deepens the connections between disability and tragedy, and it is within this intersection that Rin takes

the leading role in the story. The star player, Yūki, only partially takes over the lead when he is showing off his increased hearing to the children. The children here function as the reader, the unknowing child who is educated on the abilities Yūki has acquired because of his disability. This is a recurring trope, as the blind monk in Fujimoto's story has also compensated for his 'loss', his deficiency, by developing his other senses up to a super-human level. Struggling to develop his own skills, Fujimoto finally also starts telling himself that he can 'see' because he 'cannot see', implying a heightened sense of touch.

The athletes are all similarly confronted with tragedy and loss. Their disabilities are presented as deficiencies, and sport is presented as the tool to overcome, through strict and hard training, adversity, and perseverance, their own restrictions. The almost complete obviation of social issues in these narratives is an indication of how disability is wholly individualized. The social context plays little to no role in the telling of their stories. Society has no responsibility. Evidently, the idea of the supercrip has taken a strong hold of the stories presented in the PJ.

This way of presenting disability is continued in the visualization of the manga's characters. The first, if not the second, topic of every first chapter is the exploration of the main character's disability. In addition, to make sure the readers understand that some characters have a visual impairment, all the blind characters have whited out eyes (see images 6, 8, and 9), while Kamiji Yui's disability is made visible through her use of a wheelchair. Furthermore, the three athletes on the covers of the PJ all have a visible disability. The covers on the first and second volumes depict runners with a blade, while the third volume cover depicts a wheelchair basketball athlete. This "hyper-visibility" of the athletes' disabilities helps in lowering expectations of performance, and reinforces disability, not athletic

performance, as the main characteristic of those depicted (Peers 2009, 655). The covers are the first things one sees when picking up the PJ. Therefore, the clear visualization of disability through mobility technologies such as the blade and the wheelchair is effective in communicating the message of disability to its readers.

Conclusion

The way disability is visualized in the PJ aligns with how the IPC has marketed disability. In fact, the visualization of athletes' disabilities on the covers confirms Howe's argument that those who make use of mobility technologies are most prominently displayed within Paralympic discourses (Howe 2011, 875, 879). The supercrip narrative also forms the foundation for the stories presented in the PJ. Met with tragedy, loss, and with their disabilities displayed as deficiencies, the athletes all fight to 'overcome' their disabilities through perseverance, and the development of super-human like abilities within the scope of their respective sports. The obviation of social context completes the picture by individualizing both the disability and the struggle, leaving out any larger issues of living with a disability in Japan. This confirms Peers' conclusion that the Paralympic Movement is not providing a "remedy to the tragedy of disability, but rather, it continually reproduces the figure of the tragic disabled in order to reproduce itself" (Peers 2009, 657).

I want to clarify, however, that I am not attempting to discredit those working hard in Japan to promote the Paralympic Games in Tokyo through works such as the PJ. In fact, I agree with Carol Thomas when she argues that "any loss in clarity of ideas along the way" might be a small price to pay for making "social advances achieved by oppressed groups" (Thomas 2004, 581). However, creating a tangible Paralympic legacy with the Tokyo

2020 Games will require more than lip service. It requires the active participation of people with a disability, a critical dialogue (Bush, et al. 2013, 644), and integration into organizations involved in the organization of the PG and in the lives of people with a disability (McGillivray, et al. 2019, 180). This is something the PJ does well. A majority of the athletes in the PJ are actual Paralympic athletes, and it is with their cooperation and input that these stories are told. The PJ also offers an easy entrance into the world of the PG, as the different sports and their rules are explained through accessible narratives. I suggest, therefore, not a discontinuation of efforts such as the PJ. Instead, a more critical understanding of disability, and the inclusion of the social context, the daily struggles of living in Japan with a disability, would be a great step forward in creating a more realistic narrative of the lives Japanese Paralympians, and their sporting careers.

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