

*Remembering Barbara Jordan: A Missed Opportunity*

**Introduction**

The Barbara Jordan statue at the University of Texas at Austin was erected to represent the women on campus. Her statue's erection was especially important to the campus, as she is the only person honored in the campus' public art who has a direct link to the institution and state being an educator at UT Austin and a Texas Senator. In this essay, I will explore how public memorials promote a highly specific narrative of the person or event in question and how this, intentionally or inadvertently, hides the nuances of or related to said person/event.

In recent discussions of public commemoration, a controversial issue has been how exactly memorials, particularly statues of public figures, ask their audience(s) to remember them. On one hand, some scholars argue that statues are meant to serve a greater, more symbolic purpose. Statues of Confederate soldiers, for instance, were used to honor the sacrifice and fierceness of these soldiers, championing an idea of redemption and recovery<sup>1</sup>. From this perspective, certain actions taken and beliefs held by the person in question are overlooked to convey a specific message. On the other hand, however, contrasting scholarship argues that memorializing the less glamorous aspects of one's life is important to promote a more truthful narrative of a public figure, especially if stigma at the time prevented them from speaking about it openly. The AIDS Quilt, for example, honored the lives lost in a personal, and thus much more realistic, way. In the words of Carole Blair and Neil Michel, the "Quilt panels tell rather than imply stories. Visitors learn about the hobbies, political leanings, cultural status, age, work lives, favorite vacation spots, intimate relationships, personal accomplishments, and aspirations of the

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<sup>1</sup> Heath, Robert L., and Damion Waymer. "Public Relations Intersections: Statues, Monuments, and Narrative Continuity." (*Public relations review* 45.5 (2019))

individuals represented”<sup>2</sup>. From this perspective, remembering a person or public figure honestly means embracing the stigmatized or frowned upon aspects of one’s life, like homosexuality, chronic illness, or dis/ability.

Though I acknowledge that public memorials are subject to the artist’s interpretation of their client’s guidelines (and that these clients are often large institutions with their own agendas), I stand firm in the belief that idealized portrayals of public figures effectively erase important facets that impacted the honoree’s day-to-day life. Just as we scrutinize Confederate statues for their implicit ties to white supremacy, we must also critically examine the statue of Barbara Jordan and expose its omission of any reference to her dis/ability, a significant part of her lived experience. I argue that it is imperative to analyze the UT campus statue of Jordan in a manner that highlights this oversight, emphasizing the need to acknowledge and represent all dimensions of a person's identity. Some may counter this, arguing that Jordan was more than just her disability, but I maintain that her reputation for being a powerful orator was not impacted by her multiple sclerosis, leaving no justifiable reason for omitting this detail from the memorial.

### **Body**

Barbara Jordan is not the first or only member of the U.S. government with a bodily disability, and she certainly is not the last. A prime example is Franklin D. Roosevelt, who suffered from infantile paralysis and thus struggled with the use of his legs. The presidency is a traditionally masculine position, and, unfortunately for Roosevelt, infantile paralysis wasn’t a celebrated or prized “condition” like losing one’s arm in war and “was also an emasculating disease. Laying waste to

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<sup>2</sup> Blair, Carole, and Neil Michel. “The AIDS Memorial Quilt and the Contemporary Culture of Public Commemoration” (*Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 10, no. 4 (2007)), p. 607

a politician's legs was... like clipping an eagle's wings.”<sup>3</sup> In FDR's case, the stigma and misunderstanding surrounding infantile paralysis compounded with the fact that he was very visible to the public eye meant that he spent a lot of time trying to shift focus away from his impairment. He often used metaphors portraying himself as a candidate that was “‘running,’ ‘standing,’ ‘going up and down,’ ‘looking ahead,’ and getting a ‘firm footing.’ These words were not the vernacular of a disabled man but rather of a fit, active, vigorous, and healthy man.”<sup>4</sup> Now, of course, Barbara Jordan did not have to worry about being emasculated, but as the first black woman elected to the Texas Senate and first black person from Texas to be elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, her fitness for office was likely under constant scrutiny, just as FDR's was.

However, unlike FDR's memorial which portrays him in a wheelchair, visitors entering the Barbara Jordan memorial at UT are greeted with an eight-foot, four-inch tall bronze statue of a standing Barbara Jordan, poised with her hands on her hips and an inviting smile. She looks prepared for anything that may come her way. Her strength is further emphasized by the fact that her statue is made of bronze, the most durable metal known to man. From this alone, there is no indication of a physical disability, and thus this particular memorial is asking audiences to remember her as perfectly able-bodied and healthy. This is problematic in that it actively ignores the fact that by the time Jordan had become a professor at the University of Texas at Austin's Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs in 1979, she was confined to a wheelchair due to her multiple sclerosis. For a statue of a person that apparently “[provides] a clear link between [the University of Texas at Austin] unlike that of any of the individuals honored by the statuary

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<sup>3</sup> Houck, Davis W., and Amos Kiewe. *FDR's Body Politics The Rhetoric of Disability / Davis W. Houck, Amos Kiewe.* (Texas A&M University Press, 2003), p. 114

<sup>4</sup> Houck, Davis W., and Amos Kiewe, p. 115

currently present on campus,”<sup>5</sup> omitting the fact that she used a wheelchair for the entirety of her time at UT is incredibly problematic to say the least. Furthermore, the two ten-foot granite slabs flanking the left and right sides of the bronze statue are engraved with various quotes relating to equality, democracy, and the American Constitution that came from Jordan’s 1976 Keynote Address, a speech she famously gave from a wheelchair. Recognizing Jordan’s fierce oratory skills by using a speech she gave in a wheelchair is, arguably, a great way to destigmatize multiple sclerosis. It could have provided a necessary bridge, showing students that those in a wheelchair are just as inspiring and well-written as their able-bodied peers. Instead, the erasure of her battle with multiple sclerosis and subsequent reliance on a wheelchair makes it seem like these were things that need to stay hidden for fear that they may diminish her stellar achievements.

Similarly, the University of Southern Alabama erected a National Pan-Hellenic Council Garden to bring awareness to the “divine nine” historically black fraternities and sororities and their impact on the institution and surrounding areas.<sup>6</sup> The garden is situated in a very central part of campus, and yet the university does not seem to care if the memorial is correctly interpreted by those who visit. The university has made no effort at all to explain the values, traditions, and beliefs of the garden, leaving the audience unable to learn from and fully appreciate the garden. The purpose of the garden was to encourage interactional diversity by fostering communication about the values embedded in the memorial, but this was completely undermined by the fact that the university did nothing to facilitate this conversation. Thus, Catherine L. Riley and Patty Ann Bogue argue that “while it is permissible for commemorative rhetoric to affect individual audiences differently, that [the differences among students] cannot peacefully or productively

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<sup>5</sup> The University of Texas Community. (1999-2000) Assembly Resolution 33: Calling for the Creation of a Committee to Oversee the Creation of a Statue Honoring Barbara Jordan.

<sup>6</sup> Riley, Catherine L, and Patty Ann Bogue. “Commemorative Spaces as Means of Enhancing Campus Diversity.” (*Journal for multicultural education* 8.3 (2014)), ¶1

coexist is extremely problematic and negates the garden's original positive and commemorative purpose."<sup>7</sup> Thanks to the statue marker, visitors of the Barbara Jordan statue can better interpret the values embedded in the memorial and it is thus able to foster communication among students about misogyny, racism, classism, and the intersectionality of those topics. Had the memorial been more truthful to Jordan's lived experience, however, it could have generated meaningful dialogue surrounding disability and how it intersects with the aforementioned topics. For example, it could have facilitated a conversation about the necessary paradigm shift in the way we view disability, best explained by Alison Kafer in *Feminist, Queer, Crip*:

Rather than casting disability as a natural, self-evident sign of pathology, we recast disability in social terms. The category of "disabled" can only be understood in relation to "able-bodied" or "able-minded," a binary in which each term forms the borders of the other... In this construction, disability is seen less as an objective fact of the body or mind and more as a product of social relations.<sup>8</sup>

Instead, by refusing to make any acknowledgment of Jordan's excellence despite suffering from multiple sclerosis and her confinement to a wheelchair, it can be argued that the memorial upholds, whether intentionally or incidentally, ableist rhetoric. Giving the sculptor and the University of Texas at Austin the benefit of the doubt, Jordan's portrayal was most likely done with intentions solely to emphasize her strength and capture her at her prime. However, an unfortunate byproduct of this is not only the omission of her disability but the perpetuation of the idea that disability is a weakness or something that can only dull a person's lifetime of accomplishments.

### **Conclusion**

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<sup>7</sup> Riley, Catherine L, and Patty Ann Bogue. "Commemorative Spaces as Means of Enhancing Campus Diversity." (*Journal for multicultural education* 8.3 (2014)), ¶36

<sup>8</sup> Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip* Alison Kafer. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), p. 5-6

In conclusion, choosing to commemorate Jordan in a highly specified manner conceals a crucial aspect of her lived experience. By portraying Jordan as firm-footed and healthy, and by using quotes from her 1979 Keynote Address without acknowledging that she gave that memorable speech in a wheelchair, the statue asks viewers to remember Barbara Jordan in a way that eliminates her experience with chronic illness and disability. In other words, the memorial's failure to both physically show Jordan in a wheelchair and its failure to make any mention of her battle with multiple sclerosis at all, means it subsequently fails to foster any meaningful conversation around disability on campus or in politics as a whole. In fact, by effectively erasing Jordan's disability as a whole, the memorial inadvertently perpetuates ableist ideas and rhetoric. Memorializing Barbara Jordan in a more honest manner would have opened doors for an abundance of conversations, including but not limited to discussions relating the interactions between disability and politics, race, gender, queerness, classism, and academia. In essence, the memorial missed an opportunity to inspire meaningful change and promote a deeper understanding of the diverse facets that contribute to an individual's identity and impact on the world.

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