Sugar, Spice, and the Not So Nice
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Chapter 4

Comics, Caregiving and Crip Time

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Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds.

—Alison Kafer (27)

Crip time is time travel. Disability and illness have the power to extract us from linear, progressive time with its normative life stages and cast us into a wormhole of backward and forward acceleration, jerky stops and starts, tedious intervals and abrupt endings.

—Ellen Samuels (n.p.)

My comics practice is a reflective exercise I lean on to slow down and make sense of the incomprehensible or the unknowable and can impart a deeper, perhaps more compassionate, understanding of events and the people involved in them. In September 2020 we were already a few months into the Covid-19 pandemic. I was both optimistic and worried for my daughter Simone as she began high school, but only in part because she was born with the genetic difference Down syndrome. She started high school with dramatically modified routines, classes were sometimes in person but more often on a computer in a virtual classroom with peers whose range of learning styles was considerable. The adjustment to high school life was difficult. She missed the familiarity of routine at her elementary school and her old friends, all of whom had gone to other high schools. I also struggled – I cancelled my anticipated travel, my daily commute and gatherings with family and friends. I thrive in and thought I enjoyed living in what Hartmut Rosa calls the accelerated “temporal structures and horizons of modernity” (22). At the launch of the pandemic, I was resentful of the stay-at-home restrictions for both of us. In time, Simone seemed to fall into the new school routine and I gave in to the new rhythm that replaced the often frenetic pre-pandemic pace. A contained and predictable pace, it was decidedly slower – for me. I returned to creating comics to consider how the pandemic constraints were affecting Simone in the short sequence titled A morning before school.
Babe, time to wake up the taxi will be here soon!

Your clothes are all picked out— I'll lay them out.

Simone— time to get up!

Up you get— I'll go get your breakfast ready. Get dressed quickly!
Simone—breakfast!

Simone—your school taxi will be here soon—hurry!
A few years ago, as part of my PhD in Critical Disability Studies, I revived my art practice after many years of teaching and administration. I love to draw with an un-erasable pen, simple lines directly onto paper, to transpose thoughts and observations without the mediation of rational intent or purpose. So with that foundation, I began a daily comics practice that lasted three years, beginning when Simone was ten years old, to the accumulation of 1095 pages. The commitment to a daily entry worked on many different levels. I found shorthand ways to draw, and my rusty drawing skills improved given the time, space and purpose to develop again. The need for content in the nightly transcription forced me to observe Simone more closely. I regularly paid attention to the small and seemingly meaningless details of our routine and repetitive life together. I could see her, hear her, sense her in a new way. These comics connections were relational, multifaceted and material. This new way of knowing came through my drawings and, as artist and critical theorist John Berger has illuminated, the action of drawing can be key to locating and internalising knowledge (p. 58). My perception of Simone’s vulnerability gave way to understanding her profound human agency. She is the knower of her embodiment, and the comics impart a glimpse into her. And so during the Covid-19 pandemic, I returned to drawing comics alongside her – using the observation and comics skills I had honed.
Babe - you have to get dressed - the taxi will be here soon!

What is the taxi driver's name?

Simone - please up!

Mom - what's the taxi driver's name?

His name is Garab. Simone please focus - get dressed!

What's the taxi driver's name?

Garab.
Today is Monday

On Friday we play basketball

I'm doing my presentation today!

Great! — Simone, your school taxi is here!
I began to explore the manifestation of time and Simone’s experience of it. Unquestionably, she navigates the world with a different rhythm than I do. Through my comics practice, I became acutely aware of this different pace. I discovered through the individual writings of Robert McRuer (200), Alison Kafer (27) and Ellen Samuels (n.p.) that it had a name – *crip time*. The word *crip* – reclaimed by disability movements from the pejorative cripple – combined with *time*, crip time serves to define the world through the cadences of the disabled person. Crip time is non-normative. It exists in the larger social arena to challenge the myth of progress and standardised life goals as well as in the different paces of everyday life. It is not on a clock; it does not adhere to expectations. Crip time does not follow a trajectory from beginning to end with a desired result; it can be just more of the same without closure or completion.

As an art form, comics are adept at imparting an understanding of the experience of time. They can linger in a moment, slow time down, speed it up, stop or go in reverse. Comics theorist Scott McCloud dissected the visual elements and concluded that in addition to the content, the shapes and sizes of panels, and the space inside and between the panels, visualise time duration. McCloud also states that the direction the panels are read in, from left to right as is expected in Western languages, can factor into a preconditioned expectation of a “linear progression” of time (99-101). Artist Chris Ware creatively employs the visual comics elements to disrupt and disorient the reader. He focuses on depicting time at a slow pace specifically as counter to the speed of modernity. Georgiana Banita in response to Ware’s work states that his portrayal of “disrupted temporality [through] incrementalism and fragmentation […] do not function identically, they converge to generate narrative slowness and critique modern practices of acceleration” (177). Ware employs empty panels, non-verbal panels, repetition of panels and a disruption of the reading logic through panel placement. These same strategies can also be used to depict crip time and the experience of it by those who navigate the world differently – like Simone. Comics make crip time materially clear.
Good morning. I am a bit early. I will clean the car.

OK. Good morning.

Simone - C'mon, let's brush your teeth.

Simone?

Simone, please.

I have to get Charlie some food!

Simone, I'll feed him.

Sorry Mommy.

Let's move faster Garab's here.
headband for mask

glasses

hearing aids

mask

hat

backpack

coat

gloves

boots

Covid screen form

whew!

OK let's go
I learned through the creation of the comics sequence that Simone’s pace during Covid-19 remains generally unchanged. She is oblivious to the demands of time, the arrival of the school taxi, the start of virtual school or online occupational therapy. Some days we are in sync; others, not so much. It leads me to reflect on my own connections to time by the clock and the stress it causes me when I perceive other people waiting. I race to cram in as many tasks as I can, in part because as a full-time working mother of three children, I perceive there is always so much to do. I hold my internal clock in high value, and like most normative experiences and embodiments, it can be invisible until a contrast materialises, as when normative time and crip time are experienced side by side. I sense the time intersections as a frustration expressed as hurry up, slow down, more time, time is up, etc. I am increasingly aware that caregiving requires an orientation to the pace of the person being cared for, often at a rate a little or a lot different from the caregiver’s speed. I am beginning to learn to move, without resistance, at this different pace with my daughter. When I do, it enhances our bond and is a method to acknowledge and respect her difference.

Creating comics also slows me down, takes care of me, gives me a focus and a joyful outlet. Comics help me to challenge assumptions I might have about Simone, ones I make even after living with her for her fifteen years of life. They confront my preconceived beliefs about time and what is normative. Comics make material the dialogic exchange and force me to reflect on my responses. And while the Covid-19 pandemic has decelerated my life and forced me to adjust, I am aware I am still tied to a clock and its dictates of meetings, school and dinner, but Simone is not. The contrast between crip time and post-industrial modern time is manifested in my household on a regular basis, but underscored even more so during Covid-19. Crip time is her time orientation, and my attention to it is generative for both of us. Crip time makes time to take care.
Simone please Garab is waiting!!

Good morning! It's no problem!

Good morning! Sorry we're late.

Have a good day. Love you!

Bye Mommy.
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I dedicate this paper to my dad – John J. Purcell (1933–2021) – who also lovingly compelled me to slow down, especially in his final months.

Bibliography

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