

## Out of Time: Crip Time and Fantastic Resistance



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Part of my ongoing research investigates the subversion of normative time and disability in science fiction narratives through the depiction of characters experiencing time in non-normative ways, focusing on what I call characters *out of time*.<sup>1</sup> This analysis takes inspiration from Ellen Samuels, reading these characters as “bodies of crip time,” but it also connects to other disability and/or crip scholars such as Alison Kafer and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. I suggest a way of engaging with disability and ability in non-realist texts not only by focusing the analysis on explicit representations of characters with realistic, culturally recognizable traits of disability, but also through fantastic elements and storytelling conventions of the genre. This could potentially make visible the ways in which discourses of disability and ability are utilized within the narratives.

### Normative and Crip Time

Time is often considered a linear process, from the past to the present and towards the future. This notion is fraught by discourses of progression and development and can often be found in science fiction, where disability often is considered in terms of medical or technological developments, progress, and cures (Wälivaara). Not least in adherence to what Alison Kafer calls “disability-free” futures leading to the notion that a better and more desirable future is a future without disability (3). This linear and progressive notion of time also applies to our thinking about the structure of lifetimes, that a person, during their lifetime, should develop from birth to death via certain phases such as childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age. During this time, one is supposed to experience certain life events in an expected order—at the right time—such as entering the labor market, finding a partner, getting married, having children, retiring, and so on.

However, not everyone follows this normative organization of time and life course, and those who do not are often considered deviant. As shown by research about temporality in, for example, feminist, queer, and disability studies, the way we organize time is normative, and based on white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, able-bodied and able-minded people (Freeman; Halberstam; Kafer). Kafer, for example, charts how disability is conceptualized in terms of temporality and “how might disability affect one’s orientation to time” (26). Crip time, according to Kafer, requires us to reimagine normative time and recognize that it is based on “very particular minds and bodies” (27). The impulse is not to assimilate disabled bodies into normative time, but instead reconsider how normative time can be challenged by crip time. She states: “Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds” (Kafer 27).

While crip time can be used to indicate subversive ways of living in time, Ellen Samuels offers a reflection on the “less appealing aspects of crip time” in a creative non-fiction essay published in the academic journal *Disability Studies Quarterly*. Samuels highlights the ways in which not being in-sync, aligned, and part of a world structured according to normative time can leave marks. I read it as a type of testament to the force of normative time and the strain it can put upon those of us living in crip time.

### **Crip Time and the Fantastic**

Notably, two of Samuels’s six perspectives on crip time are illustrated through connecting them to concepts drawn from fantastic fiction: “*Crip time is time travel*” and “*crip time is vampire time*.” Not only do these make up a sizable part of the essay, two out of six, but they also serve as a framing for the entire essay, its beginning and ending. As a scholar of science fiction and disability, I find myself intrigued by the connection Samuels establishes between her own more negative experience of living in crip time and how it is described through the language of fantastic fiction. I am, however, not surprised by this analogy. Perhaps the fantastic, and the stories in which the laws and taken-for-granted truths of current reality can be set aside in favor of an exploration of other realities, provides a language and an analogy of recognizable narratives seldom found elsewhere. While much mainstream fiction does not depict the experiences of people with disabilities, much less the experience of living in crip time, much fantastic fiction deals explicitly with explorations into the nature of time itself. Fantastic genres recurrently tell stories about characters with alternative or non-normative relationships to time: characters controlling time or losing control of time, becoming stuck in time, or being pulled/scattered across time; characters having unlimited time or being out of time. Such fantastic narratives can indeed provide us with numerous examples that can challenge normative ideas of time as linear and progressive, as the Doctor kindly reminds us: “People assume that time is a strict progression of cause to effect, but actually from a non-linear, non-subjective viewpoint - it's more like a big ball of wibbly wobbly... time-y wimey... stuff” (“Blink”).

Looking at this preoccupation of time in science fiction and those characters experiencing time in non-normative ways from the perspective of disability might shed light on the ways in which such narratives can provide theorization about the relationship between normative time and crip time. For example, characters with unlimited lifetimes can put into question and defamiliarize to us the very ways in which we think about life, its phases, and transitions. By living multiple lifetimes, at different pacing, outside of the linear and progressive time of normative society they exist very much outside of normative time, or in vampire time, to borrow Samuels’s phrasing.

Those *characters out of time*, which will be my focus here, can also pose a similar challenge to normative notions of time. I have very tentatively begun to define such characters in science fiction as characters that are manufactured only to have limited lifespans or expiry dates. Their limitations in lifespan are not motivated by illness or disabilities itself, but applied to fantastic,

unrealist, and seemingly able-bodied characters. Moreover, these characters are, or become, aware of this *out of timeness* during the course of the narrative. This potentially covers an assortment of texts and characters including for example the films *The Island* (2005), *Parts: The Clonus Horror* (1979), *Never Let Me Go* (2010), and *Moon* (2009) all focusing on clones.

I thus suggest a reading of these as “bodies of crip time”: a reading that takes as its starting point Samuels’s notion of crip time as time travel. She writes:

*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. [...] we who occupy the bodies of crip time know that we are never linear, and we rage silently—or not so silently—at the calm straightforwardness of those who live in the sheltered space of normative time. (n.p.)

While these characters are undoubtedly able-bodied or even extraordinarily able-bodied, this crip reading of such characters can reveal ways in which discourses of disability and ability are utilized in science fiction. Indeed, elements such as characters with non-normative relationships to time can play a role in subverting the way we think about disability and ability as a system of power and privilege. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson suggested that in *Never Let Me Go*, the roles of normate and disabled are reversed through the strange logic of the story and that this reversal challenges assumptions about disability and ability. I argue that similar challenges can be made in other examples precisely through the storytelling conventions of fantastic fiction, in this case through the depiction of characters *out of time* that can serve to defamiliarize the familiar and taken-for-granted truths and norms of our current society that are closely intertwined with normative time. This is not to suggest that these stories are to be seen as subversive texts or characters, far from it, but that such a reading can provide new ways of understanding these narratives from a disability perspective.

### **Out of Time and Resistance**

As an example, I am going to briefly discuss the two films *The Island* and *Parts: The Clonus Horror*. Two quite similar films, which is not surprising as shown by the lawsuit filed by the creators of *Clonus* against *The Island* (Booker 184). Both films follow a similar narrative arc beginning with the protagonists unaware of their status as both clones and captives manufactured to provide spare parts for a wealthy elite. They are held in confinement without any knowledge of the everyday-life or even existence of the outside world, with the exception of respective film’s utopia: the Island or America, where the lucky few eventually are chosen to go. However, these utopias do not exist, and those chosen to go there are instead harvested for organs. The protagonists begin to question the word of authorities, the taken-for-granted life of their society, and the awful truth is eventually revealed to both audience and protagonists. The protagonists then flee, seek help, and try to expose the injustice.

Both films begin with clearly establishing the clones' physical prowess, in *Clonus* through depiction of athletic competition, pushups, and cycling; in *The Island* through health controls, exercise, restricted and controlled diets, and the announcement that "A healthy person is a happy person." The films thus set up a premise in which these characters are to be understood as able-bodied, or even extraordinarily able-bodied. These characters, like those in *Never Let Me Go* as described by Garland-Thomson, have the status of disability, but the embodiment of the normate. This reversal potentially puts into question normative notions of disability and ability through defamiliarizing it by using storytelling conventions offered by the fantastic.

These clones are indeed characters out of time in at least two ways. First, they are outside of normative time—extracted from linear, progressive time and its normative life stages. They are held apart from the rest of society, living according to their own temporality, and governed by a medical and scientific authority. For example, in *The Island*, the clones' lives are limited to work, sleep, exercise, and controlled entertainment while waiting to go to the Island, for the protagonist a tedious existence. Sexual impulses are removed, thus hindering the possibility of reproduction. In *Clonus*, a similar structure is in place, with the addition that most clones, except for the protagonist, have had their intelligence reduced during the cloning process, and if they are disobedient, they are lobotomized.

Second, they are running out of time—at any moment, they or those they love are subjected to organ harvest and death, which serves as a temporal driving force through the narrative when the protagonists uncover the truth. The films are constructed as narratives of resistance, of protagonists fighting against the odds against an overwhelmingly powerful force of immoral antagonists set to uphold oppressive structures. As the protagonists learn the truth of their existence, the ways in which their time is limited, and the ways in which others live their lives through love, reproduction, and freedom, they rage against the privileged positions of those "in the sheltered space of normative time." They rage, not silently but violently, against the unjust and oppressive system that reduces them to something less than human, unworthy of life, and kept only to maintain the able-bodied population. The clones are reduced to something less than human, products, or things in order to justify the exploitation of their bodies.

### **Conclusion**

Reading these characters as bodies of crip time can showcase the ways in which the characters experience being out of time (or indeed experience crip time) and the ways in which the narrative arc of resistance can be understood in terms of a challenge towards the privileges of those within normative time. However, as the resistance is over, the clones of *The Island* becomes integrated into the sheltered space of normative time and, while the main characters of *Clonus* are either killed or lobotomized, the final scene suggest that the resistance was successful as the existence of the clone facility reaches the press. The films emphasize the primarily negative experience of being bodies in crip time rather than the subversive aspects of crip time but, by doing so, they showcase the unjust and oppressive gatekeepers and the privilege of living within normative time.

The depiction of non-realist characters experiencing time in non-normative ways can assist in reimagining, and defamiliarizing or making strange, the familiarity of the organization of time masquerading as a universal truth and highlight the privileges of those within normative time.

## Notes

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