

**Cite this article:** Ellen Samuels, “Slow Time, Slow Futurity,” in “Exploring Indisposability: The Entanglements of Crip Art,” Colloquium, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2022), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.13275>.

## ***Slow Time, Slow Futurity***

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I have been thinking about slowness lately because I have been thinking about survival. I have been trying to imagine a future in which more of us can survive, more of us must survive, but in which we do not forget or erase those who have not survived. And that future, I am discovering, moves slowly. It moves with a slowness that is not a choice, but neither is it an imposition. It is a tactic. And I call that tactic *slow futurity*.

Slow futurity is grounded in the limitations and possibilities of bodyminds who cannot keep up with normative temporal structures. It provides a necessary framework to think about how we live and move and work in this ever-hastening world. But slow futurity is not a door you can simply walk through. It is a wall. It is a cliff. It is a ramp down which the bodymind’s wheels spin inexorably faster, so that slowing down is not so much a choice as a matter of gravity. It draws deeply upon the futurity that Alison Kafer envisions in her crucial book *Feminist Queer Crip*, one that “embrace[s] disabled people,” “imagine[s] disability differently,” and “support[s] multiple ways of being,” but it is decidedly less utopian—which is not in itself meant as a rejection of utopian thinking.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, now more than ever, we need to envision and work toward more expansive and inclusive futures. But as a companion to those imagined futures, as a necessary twin, there is slow futurity, the future that is ground into our bones.

Slow futurity has another necessary twin, a condition of its existence, and that is slow violence. As Rob Nixon writes in his profoundly influential 2011 book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*:

By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all . . . a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales.<sup>2</sup>

In Nixon’s analysis, this is the violence of pollution and climate change, of poverty and food deserts, and, writ large, of neocolonialism and global capitalism. Expanding on the submerged disability context of Nixon’s work, the lack of adequate health care for millions of people in the United States is slow violence, as is the erosion of disability care and benefit systems, the denial of labor rights for home healthcare workers, the imposition of work requirements on Medicaid recipients, and many other aspects of the current right-wing assault upon sick and disabled people and our care networks in this country. As I write these

words, the uneven and painfully inadequate government response to the COVID-19 pandemic is slow violence, the novel virus woven into our lives on the warp and weft of injustices worn smooth over centuries passed.

The conceptual framework of slow violence makes these forms of violence more visible and recognizable and thus calls for some form of resistant response. Yet Nixon argues that one reason it can be difficult to muster a mass response to slow violence is that it is not spectacular enough: "In an age that venerates instant spectacle, slow violence is deficient in the recognizable special effects that fill movie theaters and boost ratings on TV." His explication of this dynamic, like much of his book, evokes disability and illness, as he continues, "Chemical and radiological violence, for example, is driven inward, somatized into cellular dramas of mutation that—particularly in the bodies of the poor—remain largely unobserved, undiagnosed, and untreated."<sup>3</sup>

In their 2016 essay "Sick Woman Theory," Johanna Hedva also grapples with the question of shaping political resistance in the context of chronic illness, asking repeatedly, "How do you throw a brick through the window of a bank if you can't get out of bed?" Hedva's conclusion, that "most modes of political protest are internalized, lived, embodied, suffering, and . . . invisible," turns the exclusion of disabled and sick people from traditional modes of political protest on its head, suggesting that, in fact, disability and chronic illness are at the center of protest because of the way resistance—and the wear of struggle—becomes embodied.<sup>4</sup> This provocative claim is key to understanding how slow futurity is not, like *crip time*, an alternative mode of temporality, but rather it is fundamental and even normative to how time works in late capitalism—perhaps most normative at the moments where it is constructed as being so far outside the norm as to be nearly inconceivable. Consider the exhaustion and precarity under which the majority of people in the world labor; consider the impact of manmade [*sic*] climate change on the entire planet and the populations it impacts first and most severely. Slow futurity, at its most basic, is the simple act of survival under these conditions.

But slow futurity is not only about survival. It is also, crucially, about asserting survival through projects of the imagination that work the tensions and paradoxes of slow fastness and fast slowness. Like Hedva, I evoke here the crucial words of Audre Lorde in her poem "[A Litany for Survival](#)," which I propose is a key text to the concept of slow futurity.<sup>5</sup>

I read Lorde's poem as a foundational text of slow futurity. The centrality of the sick and disabled bodymind to slow futurity is apparent in this poem, as well as in Lorde's persistent theme of speaking out against invisibility—most famously in her statement that "your silence will not protect you" in the context of her experience with breast cancer.<sup>6</sup> Here I am following Therí A. Pickens, Jina B. Kim, Sami Schalk, Julie Avril Minich, Sarah Chinn, and others who have evoked Lorde as a key figure for disability justice and for what Kim has termed "*crip-of-color critique*."<sup>7</sup> "Speaking out" and "breaking silence," I suggest, can be expanded beyond their focus on vocal and auditory communication to encompass all forms of imaginative political expression through which slow futurity is manifested in response and resistance to the workings of slow violence.

This is a necessary framework because, as disability studies has moved to engage with slow violence, it has faced a challenge of how to oppose slow violence without reinscribing disability as a tragic mistake or deliberate harm. Disability studies in the context of the global North has been deeply invested in the recuperation of disability from the abject

realms of pathology, tragedy, and curse. But when we consider disability caused by violence, this work of recuperation is challenged, as disability is often mobilized both to signify the immoral and antihuman effects of violence and to justify calls for reparations. There are no easy or simple answers to this issue, as Eli Clare notes in *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*, when he asks, “How do we witness, name, and resist the injustices that reshape and damage all kinds of body-minds—plant and animal, organic and inorganic, nonhuman and human—while not equating disability with injustice?”<sup>8</sup>

Clare’s eloquent response in his book takes the form I call *lyric theory*, a mode of expressive and intellectual creation characterized by an inseparable merging of the world-work of theory and the heart-work of the lyric. Lyric theory demands that imagination meets argument at a point of tension, where neither overwhelms the other. Thus personal experience is not offered as a mere anecdote to introduce the serious work of analysis but is itself doing the work of theory—if we consider that theory is the attempt to explain and, in the process, create the world we inhabit. The place of theory, then, its work as a primary mode of persuasion and meaning-making, is not as a dry footnote to the poetry of the self but is enacted through the same words as the personal, the same connections that cause a reader to stop and tense in recognition, to say, *That is what I feel also; that is what it has been like for me*. And beyond that eye-opening, gut-squeezing moment, lyric theory must also sketch a map of where recognition might lead: toward change, toward kinship, toward the creation of a new kind of world.

Lorde’s poem, like so much of her work, is also lyric theory, of course.<sup>9</sup> It would be impossible to unwind her political arguments, her political vision, from the visceral, metaphoric lyricism of her language, and neither can exist without the other. In claiming Lorde’s work as lyric theory, it is also crucial to recognize how it emerges in the space of slow futurity. Indeed, this poem, perhaps Lorde’s most famous and oft-repeated, was written in slow time. In a 1979 interview with Mari Evans, Lorde describes a year when she felt profoundly guilty about not having written anything, except in her journal. But at the end of the year, when she went back to reread her journal entries, she found entire poems embedded in the text, ready to be lifted out and sent into the world—one of which was “A Litany for Survival.”<sup>10</sup> Such a creative process is the very opposite of the linear path writers and scholars are told to follow to be professionally successful—or the uphill battle we are convinced is the only way to win our freedom.

The work of slow futurity so often happens out of frame, between breaths, in the time we think we are wasting, the time we fear we are failing ourselves, our communities, our callings. And yet those broken spaces are where, in the end, we may find the tools we most need to survive.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 45.

<sup>2</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 6.

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- <sup>4</sup> Johanna Hedva, "Sick Woman Theory," [https://johannahedva.com/SickWomanTheory\\_Hedva\\_2020.pdf](https://johannahedva.com/SickWomanTheory_Hedva_2020.pdf) (originally published online in *Mask Magazine*, January 2016), 9.
- <sup>5</sup> Audre Lorde, "A Litany for Survival," *The Black Unicorn* (New York: Norton, 1978), 31–32.
- <sup>6</sup> Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 1980).
- <sup>7</sup> See Therí A. Pickens, *New Body Politics: Narrating Arab and Black Identity in the Contemporary United States* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Jina B. Kim, "Toward a Crip-of-Color Critique: Thinking with Minich's 'Enabling Whom?,'" *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association* 6, no. 1 (2017), <https://csalateral.org/issue/6-1/forum-alt-humanities-critical-disability-studies-crip-of-color-critique-kim>; Julie Avril Minich, "Enabling Whom? Critical Disability Studies Now," *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association* 5, no. 1 (2016), <https://csalateral.org/issue/5-1/forum-alt-humanities-critical-disability-studies-now-minich>; Sami Schalk, "Critical Disability Studies as Methodology," *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association* 6, no. 1 (2017), <https://csalateral.org/issue/6-1/forum-alt-humanities-critical-disability-studies-methodology-schalk>; Sarah E. Chinn, "Feeling Her Way: Audre Lorde and the Power of Touch." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 9, nos. 1/2 (2003): 181–204.
- <sup>8</sup> Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 56.
- <sup>9</sup> In the introduction to Lorde's first collection of essays, *Sister Outsider*, Nancy Bereano writes: "When we began editing *Sister Outsider* . . . Audre Lorde informed me, as we were working one afternoon, that she doesn't write theory. 'I am a poet,' she said. Lorde's stature as a poet is undeniable. And yet there can be no doubt that *Sister Outsider*, a collection of essays and speeches drawn from the past eight years of this Black lesbian feminist's nonfiction prose, makes absolutely clear to many what some already knew: Audre Lorde's voice is central to the development of contemporary feminist theory. She is at the cutting edge of consciousness." See introduction to Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom: Crossing Press, 1984), 7.
- <sup>10</sup> Audre Lorde, *Conversations with Audre Lorde* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 76.