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Aging, Crip Time, and Dependency Care in Joyce Farmer’s *Special Exits*

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores how Joyce Farmer’s *Special Exits* resists the prevailing decline-burden discourse concerning aging-into-disability and dependency care by imagining alternative perceptions of aging-into-disability temporal and caregiving constructs that are not centered on productivity, independence, and progress. Drawing on Alison Kafer’s “crip time” and Eva Kittay’s “dependency care” concepts, the essay examines a fundamental reorientation that resists ableist-dominated descriptions of normative timelines, and shows how Farmer uses narrative pacing in *Special Exits* to match the ways that its older adult characters respond to physical and mental challenges that require flexibility and adjustment. The author also shows how aging-into-disability can be reimagined through a crip time lens that emphasizes new forms of living with and in relationship to time instead of only considering deficits and losses. The second part discusses how crip time and care time intersect, and how caregiving takes on a transformative meaning for the story’s characters when dependency is viewed as facilitating interdependence and connection, thus transforming *care-giving* into *care-gifting*. Farmer uses this intersection along with an aging-disability nexus lens to address the ongoing need for counternarratives to challenge normative perceptions of aging and disability, and to promote a future in which individuals with age-associated disabilities can flourish by accepting and acting in accordance with their own time requirements.

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As a genre, comics and graphic narratives frequently feature children or adolescents as primary characters, but during the past two decades there have been more attempts by graphic novelists to conceptualize and describe aging processes and issues.[1] In the well-known and commercially successful graphic novel *Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant?*, Roz Chast (2014) depicts the last few years of her parents' lives, her experiences caring for them, and her responses to their deaths. She describes the now-common American experience of convincing aging parents to move into assisted living facilities when their physical and cognitive capabilities make it difficult to provide care. While *Can't We Talk* succeeds in its humorous approach to aging and caregiving, thus rendering the topics accessible to readers, Erin Lamb and Rebecca Garden (2019) argue that Chast appears incapable of "see[ing] beyond the master narrative of decline and imagin[ing] that there might still be pleasures in extreme old age" (156). In other words, while the work is groundbreaking in some respects, her images and storyline still reflect a mainstream narrative about loss and decline. In a seminar presentation entitled "The seduction of successful aging: Imag(in)ing older age in comics and graphic novels," Nicole Dalmer and Lucia Serantes (2019) describe the positive development of a growing presence of older adult characters and late-life experiences in graphic novels, but they argue that even as adult characters appear to "resist stereotypical assumptions and ageist narratives," they show a tendency to "yield to the seduction of successful aging." It appears that a growing number of artists deserve recognition for accepting old age as a worthy topic for aesthetic study, even when some find it hard to sidestep the hazards of a narrative that has long shaped mainstream American cultural representations of aging: the dichotomy consisting of loss and decline on one side and a positive and successful paradigm on the other. In the former, elderly adults are portrayed in terms of loss of function, vitality and youth; this is especially true in the mass media. In her acclaimed *Declining to Decline*, Margaret Gullette (1997) uses a "master narrative of decline" when examining how contemporary American age ideology overemphasizes mental and physical decline (11). She notes how the language of loss and negativity evokes an aversion to aging by reducing older adults to a social problem to be solved or cured. Such negative perceptions of old age resist efforts to imagine later life as meaningful and having potential for growth. Further, Gullette believes that contemporary attitudes devalue the experiences of family members who care for loved ones who are in need of dependency care.

In contrast, emerging models of later life as a period with great potential for active productivity are also proposed to counter the decline narrative. John Rowe and Robert Kahn (1997) offer a "successful ageing" paradigm consisting of three criteria for identifying successful aging: low probability of disease and disease-related disability, high cognitive and physical functional capacity, and active engagement with life (433). However, their model has been criticized by academics and gerontologists.[2] According to several critiques, it is simply a new form of ageism and ableism. Sharon-Dale Stone (2003) argues that because Rowe and Kahn "value cognitive and physical ability while denigrating any kind of disability," disabled or diseased individuals who do not meet their criteria are at risk of being judged as failures (62). Meredith Minkler and Pamela Fadem (2002) criticize successful ageing models from a disability perspective: "The term itself and some of its specific dimensions and meanings may serve to further stigmatize and marginalize people who are aging with severe disabilities" (229). In sum, successful aging models deserve credit for shifting our focus from negative conceptions to a positive view of aging, but in the end they reinforce negative images of older adults with disabilities or chronic diseases. These "cultural master narratives about later life" fail to acknowledge "a possibly attractive phase which harbors potentially valuable and enriching experiences and goals to strive for" (Laceulle 2018: 84). Thus, the need remains for a balanced and realistic perspective on the complex realities of older adult lives that avoids a burden discourse while accurately addressing the needs of family, medical, and institutional caregivers. In this regard, Jan Baars and Chris Phillippson (2014) discuss valuing old age as a natural part of life, and embracing the full range of aging experiences in terms of their "potentials *and* limitations, the pleasurings *and* sufferings, the continuing vitality, competence *and* vulnerability of ageing" (26: emphasis in original). They encourage us to address all aspects of aging based on an acceptance of the natural realities of physical and cognitive decline.

In this essay I will examine Joyce Farmer's graphic novel *Special Exits* as a visual narrative that transcends decline-success dualism, and describe how she approaches the difficulties and challenges of aging while recognizing the ability of older adults to adapt to loss and disability. Since its publication in 2010, *Special Exits* has been praised for its accurate portrayals of aging and caregiving experiences. The novel describes the experiences of Lars and Rachel, both in their eighties, as they reach the point of needing assistance for much of their personal care needs. Their daughter Laura serves as the reader's witness to the gradual loss of their mobility as she provides support and care.[3] Rachel loses her eyesight because she neglects to take her glaucoma medication, and thus becomes completely dependent on Lars when Laura can't be present. When Lars becomes too weak and fragile to care for his wife, she is sent to a nursing home where she dies due to staff negligence. After her death, Lars is diagnosed with lung cancer and becomes dependent on Laura for his care.

Farmer's motivation to emphasize aspects of caregiving for older adults is clear. During one interview with Alex Dueben she stated, "I thought it was a topic that people hadn't worked on before at that time, either in print or in comics. I thought it was a very worthwhile topic, this gradual decline" (2010). My goal in this essay is to contribute to the limited literature on representations of aging and disabilities in long-form comics. One of the few examinations of the ways that graphic novels and novelists address the topic is Amelia DeFalco's essay, "Graphic somatography: Life writing, comics, and the ethics of care." According to DeFalco (2016), the "capacious layering" of words and images in graphic novels "effectively represent[s] multiple perspectives without synthesis," thus making the form most suitable for examining "the idealizing tendencies of ethics of care philosophy" (223). She notes that care ethics tend to ennoble caregiving by focusing on the quality of its moral goodness while avoiding negative aspects such as caregiver stress and burnout. Lamb and Garden (2019) analyze *Special Exits* as a successful story for analyzing "popular representation[s] of old age and/or disability" (150) describing it as a counternarrative that "resists tragic interpretations of changes in ability, adaptation, and adoption of assistive devices by presenting opportunities for continued growth concurrent with increased age/disability" (160). They suggest that *Special Exits* paints an accurate picture of physical decline while imaginatively exploring age-related functional changes as a natural part of life, one "met with adaptation and care" rather than deficit and pathology (157). Building on Lamb and Garden's argument, this essay will use an aging-disability nexus to examine how *Special Exits* refutes the currently dominant decline-success paradigm, and extend their insights by considering the idea of caregiving—a key concept in *Special Exits*, but one that Lamb and Garden only mention in passing.[4] In this analysis I will confront the losses, deficits, and habitual associations of aging with infirmities and disabilities, as well as typical representations of caring for aging adults as burdensome. Drawing on Alison Kafer's "crip time" and Eva Kittay's "dependency care" concepts, this essay examines a fundamental reorientation that resists ableist-dominated descriptions of normative timelines, and shows how Farmer uses narrative pacing in *Special Exits* to match the ways that its older adult characters respond to physical and mental challenges that require flexibility and adjustment. The essay also shows how aging-into-disability can be reimagined through a crip time lens that emphasizes new forms of living with and in relationship to time instead of only considering deficits and losses. The second part discusses how crip time and care time intersect, and how caregiving takes on a transformative meaning for the story's characters when dependency is viewed as facilitating interdependence and connection, thus transforming care-giving into care-gifting—the term "care-gifting" will be made good in later discussion. Farmer uses this intersection along with an aging-disability nexus lens to address the ongoing need for counternarratives to challenge normative perceptions of aging and disability, and to promote a future in which individuals with age-associated disabilities can flourish by accepting and acting in accordance with their own time requirements.

CRIP TIME AND THE AGING-DISABILITY NEXUS

In her portrayal of the everyday challenges of aging-into-disability, Farmer addresses questions that are attracting scholarly interest in a dialogue between gerontology and disability studies. When noting that age-related disabilities are more of a "when" than "if" question, Joel Reynolds and Anna Landre (2022) assert that "the guiding question of humanistic age-studies—*What does it mean to grow old?*—cannot be answered without reflecting on disability" (1). This is not simply because individuals who live longer are likely to experience more chronic diseases and impairments, but also because of the prejudices, stereotyping, and stigmas aimed at older adults and people with disabilities. Aging and disability studies scholars still require compelling real-world examples to address the intersection of their specialties. Several have proposed an "aging-disability nexus" for analyzing the "multiple, variable, and embodied experiences of aging and disability," as well as for evaluating interactions among power, relationships, socio-cultural structures, and the lived experiences that impact aging and disabled bodies (Aubrecht, Kelly, and Rice, 2020: 8). According to contributors to an edited collection of papers entitled *The Aging-Disability Nexus*, an important goal is to integrate gerontology and disability studies when examining relationships embedded in policies and practices, as well as interactions involving anti-aging and anti-disability discourses in the lives of individuals who are actually aging into/with disability. The concept is transforming work in both fields by providing space for studying their trajectories and overlapping needs. Amanda Grenier, Meredith Griffin and Colleen McGrath (2020) explore the paradox of separating thoughts about disabilities during the majority of one's life course, "only to reintroduce impairment as a central feature of aging—an intersection of the decline and tragedy narratives" (31). The paradox is evident in public policymaking: conflations of impairment, disability and aging in late life not only represent challenges to normative conceptions of aging, but also significantly impact those experiencing aging-into-disability in terms of access to services, policies, and practices that operate according to fixed chronological life course models. Grenier, Griffin and McGrath argue that an aging-disability nexus allows for "reconceptualize[ing] living with a disability in late life not as tragedy or devoid of a future, but as reflective of a wide range of experiences and realities" (31).

Similarly, a critical aging-disability nexus lens is useful for examining the lives of the two main characters in *Special Exits* and for investigating the implications of the decline discourse that dominates discussions of aging and disability, since it allows for the integration of aging-into-disability experiences when examining larger meanings associated with frailty in later life. Such a lens also offers an alternative way to analyze works of fiction that propose counternarratives to dichotomous representations of aging and care for older adults. The *Special Exits* counternarrative entails adaptation strategies that Lars and Rachel use to address aging-into-disability challenges. Rather than use the language of loss and pathology when portraying their illnesses and impairments, Farmer describes a slowed-down approach that offers an escape from ableist expectations of productivity and independence—an option for aging or disabled minds and bodies to move outside of normalized time and spaces in order to accommodate needs for different tempos and speeds. Feminist disability theorist Alison Kafer (2013) uses the term "crip time" when describing this divergence from ableist time:

> Crip time is flex time not just expanded but exploded; it requires re-imagining our notions of what can and should happen in time, or recognizing how expectations of 'how long things take' are based on very particular minds and bodies. Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds. (27)

When theorizing crip time as a disability-oriented alternative, Kafer challenges our taken-for-granted emphases on speed, efficiency and productivity. She argues that crip time allows for flexible spaces in which non-normative bodies and minds can practice different temporalities in accordance with the specifics of individual bodies and minds. Viewed through a crip time lens, the needs of disabled persons for more time to get things done, taking frequent breaks, and breaking down large jobs into smaller tasks are accepted as legitimate alternative timeframes rather than as failures to meet normalized time standards. Although Kafer's original theory emphasizes disabilities rather than aging, crip time offers a perspective for understanding how *Special Exits* navigates successful-versus-failed aging narratives that involve slowing down. Whereas the aging literature still largely treats slowed-down temporality as an inevitable aspect of bodily decline, the treatment of crip time in *Special Exits* offers an alternative approach to understanding aging-into-disability individuals, one involving equanimity in response to physical realities. That is, crip time allows aging-into-disability individuals to move in the timeframe of slowness, stasis, and equanimity in response to the realities of physical decline and age-related disability. In the following, these three aspects of crip time—slowness, stasis, and equanimity—will be used to examine the *Special Exits* story.

The slowing down idea is evident in the deliberate pacing of the *Special Exits* story. Individual panels, which constitute the syntax of graphic novels and comics, can be manipulated to establish a narrative rhythm in visual storytelling. Charles Forceville et al. (2014) observe that "the composition of panels on a page can resemble that of words in a paragraph or a sentence in prose" (488). Regarding Farmer's drawing and storytelling style, Glen Weldon (2010) describes her panels as "crowded with detail—deliberately and effectively so, to mirror the way her parents' house, and their lives, fall steadily into clutter and disrepair" (para. 20). **Figure 1** offers an example of how she uses detailed visual information to decelerate her storytelling pace (Farmer 2014: 17). The panel shows Lars engaged in one of his favorite hobbies: inspecting his stamp collection, an activity that calls for deliberate care and an eye for detail. Readers are encouraged to pause and inspect all of the objects in the frame: the meticulously

Figure 1 An example of using detailed visual information to decelerate storytelling pace. From *Special Exits* by Joyce Farmer, Copyright © 2014 by Joyce Farmer. Image used with the permission of Joyce Farmer.[5]

drawn pattern of his plaid shirt, the title of the book on his table, his disheveled hair, the mountain in the distance. The overall effect is one of slowing down the pace of the story.

In addition to being an aesthetic choice, deliberate pacing supports the need of readers to carefully consider the responses of the main characters to their aging-into-disability experiences. In a culture that values speed and efficiency, the ideas of deliberateness, gradualness and slowness of movement are often considered as markers of incapability or a condition requiring treatment, but Farmer portrays slowness as simply a different ethical orientation of which aging-into-disability is only one aspect. Another simple example is Rachel's reliance on a cane to support her slow but steady physical movements between spaces in her home. Readers watch as Laura, her stepdaughter, helps Rachel walk to the toilet. Laura adjusts her pace, and the two of them need to take several brief breaks along the way. Readers must slow down to absorb the difficulty of executing what has always been an automatic task—a clear example of ableist versus crip time.

Crip time can also manifest as a form of stasis. Rachel's physical and cognitive disabilities (with evidence of dementia) make it increasingly difficult for her to stand and for Lars to help her get out of bed for multiple late-night trips to the toilet. They therefore decide to let Rachel spend the majority of her time on the living room sofa, with Lars sleeping in a chair beside her. This decision is the novel's most significant example of stasis and adapting to unpredictable and non-productive crip time. In a world dominated by able bodies and minds, stasis represents a state of being stuck, with movement severely restricted because the possibility of escape is difficult to locate. Stasis can therefore become "a cause for lament," which is how Adam Davidson (2020) describes his experience of "parenting a disabled child as crip time" (para. 1). For Davidson, taking care of a child with disabilities means abandoning expectations of development and progress according to the normative timeframe in which the large majority of children live as they move toward adolescence and adulthood. Whereas normative time implies forward movement and productivity, Davidson interprets crip time and stasis as a different kind of movement—in his son's case, a way of living that "values and makes much of the present" (para. 27). In a like manner, Farmer portrays Rachel's life of stasis on the family sofa not as a marker of burden and grief, but as a challenge to the normative notion of productive time—in other words, a way of accepting and working with crip time.

In addition to learning about adapting to new physical and mental rhythms, new patterns of thinking and feeling, and ways of moving through the world while letting go of the nondisabled past, this new form of stasis creates opportunities for Lars to teach his daughter about crip time. To outsiders, the idea of living one's life on a sofa is one more example of the undesirable conditions that older adults must endure. Although Laura expresses dismay at the idea of Rachel not leaving the sofa for more than a year, neither Rachel nor Lars express disappointment over her loss of mobility. Lars manages Rachel's physical challenges in a matter-of-fact manner, laughing when he expresses an idea that is axiomatic for the slow decline that most older adults experience: "Yes, well—things get worse in such small increments that you can get used to anything" (Farmer 2014: 36). Throughout the novel, Laura absorbs her father's matter-of-fact attitude toward age-related changes and challenges, a learning-by-observation aspect of the story that counters narratives showing aging and caregiving as burdensome only. Laura is a good learner, accepting Rachel's immobility and incontinence, giving her stepmother sponge baths and changing her towels and clothes as part of her caregiving routine.[6]

Laura's ability to adjust resists the framing of crip time and aging-into-disability as an either-or/negative-positive contrast by presenting equanimity as an alternative. Lamb and Garden (2019) believe that *Special Exits* "represents increasing disability as simply requiring adaptation" with the ability of Lars and Rachel to absorb an ongoing series of small losses shown as a "unique narrative of adaptation," as well as a platform for educating readers about flexibility in the face of physical decline (157). In addition to dialogue and internal thought bubbles, Farmer skillfully uses her characters' body language and facial expressions to express equanimity in their responses to the loss of health and physical capabilities. ***Figure 2*** is an example of how Farmer uses a mix of words, objects, and facial expressions to communicate a sense of acceptance of aging-disability in a character. Lars' statement about his occasional wish to die

Figure 2 An example of how Farmer uses calm facial expressions to reveal Lars' acceptance of aging-disability. From *Special Exits* by Joyce Farmer, Copyright © 2014 by Joyce Farmer. Image used with the permission of Joyce Farmer.

suddenly is a very human response to the stresses of aging, decline, and providing daily care for a life-long partner (Farmer 2014: 16). All of the elements in the frame suggest normalcy: an elderly man and his daughter engaged in the everyday ritual of preparing breakfast, with the coffee jar, half-and-half container, and breakfast bowl all indicating that everything is as it should be. His comment is treated as an ordinary utterance, though it expresses an idea that we are conditioned to resist or push aside. Farmer refrains from using a special font to inject emotion into the comment, and uses Laura's facial expression to underscore a sense of calm acceptance of her father's thoughts.

Having witnessed Rachel's death in a poorly managed nursing home, Laura understands the significance of Lars' desire to die at home, hopefully surrounded by loving family members and well-trained professional caregivers. But Farmer avoids romanticizing the idea by describing many sacrifices that Laura must make in support of her father's wish—for instance, prioritizing his care over her own time, employment, and sleep requirements, and the time-consuming need to manage finances and other resources. Laura does her best to approach her father's death as a natural occurrence instead of a terrifying event filled with anxiety and horror. Lars does his part by remaining active and resourceful, even when he is bedridden. He designs a system of ropes that allows him to adjust his body in bed without help from his care providers—an action that illustrates both his desire to remain independent and his thoughtful consideration of the needs of his caregivers, who can sleep through the night without interruption. To help her readers appreciate Lars' resourcefulness, Farmer gives detailed instructions on how to create a similar rope system. To express his joy of fulfillment, she shows him triumphantly finishing the project with the proclamation "There! They won't have to turn me anymore!" (Farmer 2014: 185).

Although she acknowledges the pain and loss associated with death and the stress of caring for a dying family member, Farmer uses a deathbed scenario to confront the common narrative that portrays slow decline as a horrific experience to be avoided at all costs. Lars is portrayed as engaged with the world and interested in current events to almost the very end of his life. In one scene at a hospital, a bed-bound Lars watches a televised news report on the death of a former American President, and responds with upraised arms and the exclamation (***Figure 3***), "I beat out Nixon!" (Farmer 2014: 170). This is one of several demonstrations of his striving to maintain everyday continuity while dealing with cancer and death. Lars takes a positive approach to his sickbed existence, one that abides with the rhythms of his physical limitations. He is still capable of enjoying his stamp collection, which does not require him to get out of bed and sit in a chair at a table.

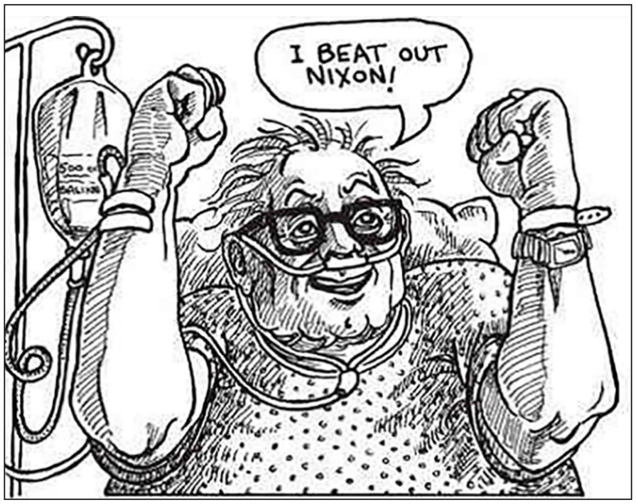

Figure 3 A hospitalized bedridden Lars managing to show his feisty spirit. From *Special Exits* by Joyce Farmer, Copyright © 2014 by Joyce Farmer. Image used with the permission of Joyce Farmer.

Equanimity is therefore an alternative way of cripping the tragic discourse about aging and disability. With such an attitude of equanimity, one can respond to age-associated disability even with humor. ***Figure 4*** shows how adding a humorous touch to experience of aging-into-disability helps create the novel's affective focus toward a dominant mood of equanimity (Farmer 2014: 38). Earlier in the story, Farmer uses Rachel's physical challenges to illustrate aging-into-disability and crip time. During one of her visits, Laura learns that Rachel has been suffering from fainting spells, and that an emergency medical response team has visited the house several times. When she asks how many times an ambulance has been called she gets different answers: a responder holds up four fingers, Lars three, and Rachel two. Depending on the underlying cause, fainting can be

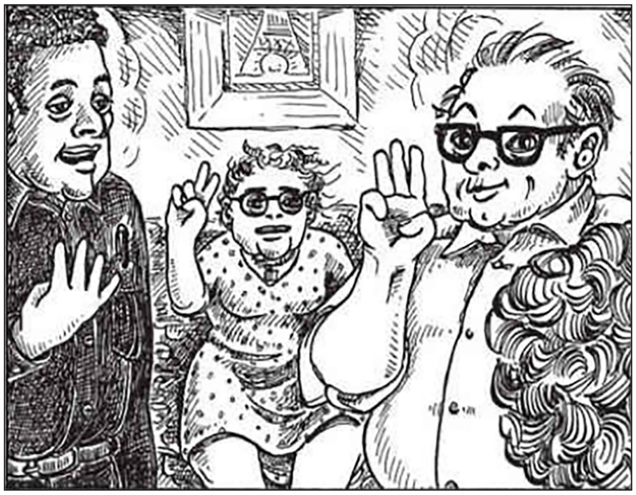

Figure 4 A humorous illustration of Rachel and Lars finger-counting the number of emergency calls. From *Special Exits* by Joyce Farmer, Copyright © 2014 by Joyce Farmer. Image used with the permission of Joyce Farmer.

viewed as a warning sign of a serious emergency, but Lars and Rachel treat it as just another sign of aging, nothing to be overly concerned about.

Rachel's loss of eyesight is another example of an equanimous response to aging-into-disability conditions. Rachel's glaucoma requires regular applications of prescription eye drops to prevent vision loss, but an unfortunate combination of misplaced/expired medications and negligence lead to serious headaches and eventual loss of eyesight. This is one of the two most tragic events in the novel (the other is her accidental death due to negligence on the part of nursing home staff) that most people would respond to with grief or anger, but Farmer chooses to emphasize the calm reactions of Rachel and Lars. Instead of frantically calling their daughter, they absorb the implications of the loss and wait until Laura's next visit to break the news. For them, it is a logical occurrence in their lives as older adults. ***Figure 5*** shows Laura's reaction, which is also calm—pondering the size of the eyedrop container while Rachel, wearing glasses that are no longer useful, appears as though she is still sighted (Farmer 2014: 46).

Figure 5 Laura's calm response to the misplaced/expired bottle of glaucoma drops. From *Special Exits* by Joyce Farmer, Copyright © 2014 by Joyce Farmer. Image used with the permission of Joyce Farmer.

DEPENDENCY CARE AND CARE-GIFTING

Taking a slower approach to aging and disability experiences, calmly accepting aging-into-disability timeframes, and embracing crip time for meaningful engagement all challenge ableist norms of efficiency and productivity. But Farmer acknowledges the eventual need for dependency care for most of us, and one of her most important contributions is her attempt to reframe it as having value in terms of establishing and/or maintaining human connections rather than further evidence of the inevitable loss of agency and autonomy.

Aging-into-disability conflicts with the American ideal of taking care of one's own needs without relying on outside help, as is advocated by the prevailing social model of disability. This model has positive aspects in terms of promoting the rights of disabled individuals by maintaining a distinction between impairment (which uses medical interpretations of physical deviations from normality to indicate deficiencies) and disability (a condition determined by social and cultural barriers). This distinction supports a shift from individual to societal perceptions regarding structural obstacles (environmental barriers, legal and social inequalities, and negative representations of disabilities, among others) that interfere with efforts by disabled individuals to achieve autonomy and full participation in employment and social activities. When discussing disability as a social construction, Harlan Hahn (1986) cites "the failure of a structured social environment to adjust to the needs and aspirations of citizens with disabilities rather than from the inability of the disabled individual to adapt to the demands of society" (128). Social disability models challenge long-held political and cultural beliefs about disabled persons by promoting "empowerment, human rights, independence and integration, and self-help and self-determination" as valid goals (Charlton 1998: 130). However, despite their success in freeing individuals with disabilities from socially constructed perceptions of dependency, these models fall short in terms of accommodating needs associated with cognitive deficits, dementia, severe physical incapacities, debilitating illnesses, and other challenges to independence that are unlikely to be achieved, regardless of how many social barriers are surmounted. In this regard, Kafer (2013) notes that

> social and structural changes will do little to make one's joints stop aching or to alleviate back pain. Nor will changes in architecture and attitude heal diabetes or cancer or fatigue. Focusing exclusively on disabling barriers, as a strict social model seems to do, renders pain and fatigue irrelevant to the project of disability politics. (14)

A critical step toward bringing the needs and experiences of disabled and aging individuals to the foreground entails embracing the ideas of dependency and care. Eva Kittay has suggested an "Ethics of Care" that perceives dependency care as a process of building networks consisting of caregivers and the cared-for. In her paper "The Ethics of Care, Dependency, and Disability," Kittay (2011) challenges the non-dependence emphasis of disability rights groups and instead advocates an acceptance of dependency as part of being human. In her book *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality and Dependency* (1999) she writes:

> The immaturity of infancy and early childhood, illness and disability that renders one nonfunctional even in the most accommodating surroundings, and the fragility of advanced old age, each serve as examples of such inescapable dependency. The incapacity here is determined neither by will nor desire, but by determinants of biology in combination with social circumstances. (29)

Kittay's dependency insights are useful for analyzing Farmer's portrayal of caregiving in *Special Exits*. Both authors forcefully challenge dismissive societal attitudes toward dependency care by putting the subject at the center of their theoretical and artistic efforts. Both shun an ableist reading of dependency care as personal failure or loss of agency in favor of envisioning sustainable futures for individuals with age-associated disabilities. *Special Exits* presents scenes of dependency as calls for empathy, support and caregiving. Farmer draws our attention to the value of care via compassionate relationships between care receivers and care givers, accommodating a perceptual shift from "care-giving" to "care-gifting" by placing images of dependency, patience and affection at the center of her storytelling. The term "care-gifting" means more than just seeing care as a gift; the word "gift" here is used as a verb. In this sense, "care-gifting" means to *gift* care in its own right; that is, *Special Exits*, true to the significant meaning of the title, brings home the value of caregiving in that caring for our loved ones gives a greater meaning and purpose to the journey of caregiving. "Care-gifting" is conceptualized here as commitment, honor, and connection-based care that benefits both the caregiver and the cared-for. However, making a gift of care does not mean that the journey of caregiving in *Special Exits* is roses all the way. In fact, Farmer honestly depicts all the challenges and difficulties involved in caring for aging parents. Yet, despite the strenuous and arduous caring responsibilities faced by all caregivers in *Special Exits*, Farmer invites the reader to see the inherent goodness and values of care by emphasizing the rewarding outcome of caregiving journey. That is, the journey of caregiving in *Special Exits* provides the caregiver and the cared-for a sense of caregiving community, a way of being in care, that empowers and energizes both. Endowing sustained care to the end with a special meaning and a greater sense of purpose is also one valuable contribution *Special Exits* gives to the caregiving literature which studies care often through the lens of caregiver burden discourse, emphasizing the loss, the cost, and the stress of caregiving, particularly elder caregiving. For example, a report on family caregiving for aging parents in the US shows that "a large body of literature […] provides strong evidence that a substantial proportion of the caregiving population experiences negative psychological effects," a report that reinforces the dominant caregiver burden discourse (Schulz and Eden 2016: 3–20). Similarly, in a systematic review article about health and psychological impacts of elder care on family caregivers, Judith Bom et al. (2019) confirm that "there is a causal negative effect of caregiving on health" (640). Rosemary A. Ziemba (2002), in a review of the literature on the experience of adult children taking care of elderly, also points out that "the empirics of family care of the elderly have been built on the general stress model, which contributes to the casting of family caregiving as primarily a negative event" (35). In sum, literature on elder care centers on the negative aspects of the caregiving process. The negative presentations of elder care leave little room to explain why many caregivers choose to care for their aging parents until the end of their life, despite all the stresses and burdens they face on a daily basis. To regard aging parents who need care as a burden not only dehumanizes them but also devalues the care work family caregivers do to sustain the health and wellbeing of the aging loved ones.

From the vantage of care-gifting, visual images of caregiving in *Special Exits* help to bring society to recognize and reimagine the value of care. The concept of care-gifting bears a close resemblance to the central meaning of a non-profit organization called CAREGIFTED, which aims to provide respite care vacations to long-term family caregivers who have sacrificed their time, resources, ambitions, energy and more to care for their disabled family member. Poet Heather MacArthur, who used her MacArthur "genius grant" for poetry to launch the organization CAREGIFTED, said in an interview that her "chief motivation was to celebrate the caregivers.… As a society we should be grateful to those who provide care in a very special way. Talking with these people, working with them, has changed my definition of love" (UW Retirement Association, 2015). A noble goal of CAREGIFTED is to give the gift of relief time to the long-term family caregivers whose contribution to society and to the disabled is often unacknowledged and unappreciated. Therefore, granting the respite time to caregivers, CAREGIFTED not only promotes public recognition of the gift of caregivers to society but also helps deepen the value of caregiving for people who have care and support needs. In a similar vein, the concept of care-gifting in *Special Exits* works to emphasize the dynamics of connection-based family relationship, to honor care as the best gift one can give to one's aging parents, and to experience caregiving as a form of sublimation and grace that completes the cycle of life and death.

To gift care does not imply that the journey of caregiving is paved with a straight and easy path. In fact, Farmer wisely holds back from romanticizing caregiving—*Special Exits* shows that for many of us, the physical and emotional demands can be overwhelming. In earlier chapters Lars is the primary caregiver for Rachel, and ***Figure 6*** frame shows him reacting to the pressure of being on call for his wife 24/7 (Farmer 2014: 59), even though he is completely devoted to her.

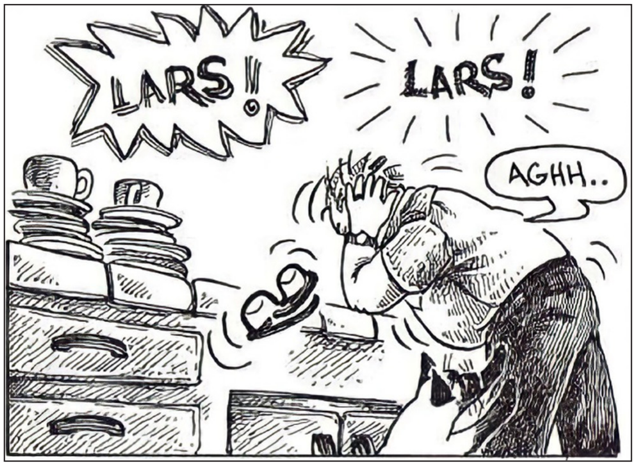

Figure 6 Lars feeling overwhelmed by decades of caregiving responsibilities. From *Special Exits* by Joyce Farmer, Copyright © 2014 by Joyce Farmer. Image used with the permission of Joyce Farmer.

Taking on a non-stop caregiving role can be exhausting, and the sound of his name being repeated time and again by someone needing his help resembles an annoying alarm that he cannot turn off. But in other parts of the chapter Farmer invites us to empathize with both the caregiver and recipient so that we acknowledge and respect Lars' perseverance until he becomes too weak and vulnerable to continue providing care for his life partner.

Thus, the concept of care-gifting brings home the fundamental truth of human dependency. ***Figure 7*** shows Lars finding Rachel after she has fallen into the bathtub (Farmer 2014: 15). Farmer skillfully makes her the visual focus by showing her face while Lars is viewed from the side and from the waist down. Like an infant child, she is completely dependent on others to pick her up. The scene demands empathy from observers looking on from outside the frame.

Figure 7 Rachel falling into the bath tub. From *Special Exits* by Joyce Farmer, Copyright © 2014 by Joyce Farmer. Image used with the permission of Joyce Farmer.

Another image of dependency occurs in Chapter 11, with Laura finding her father lying on the floor, where he apparently has been for a day or longer. The image of Laura kneeling next to her father causes readers to feel deeply for both characters, with Farmer offering space to acknowledge our emotional and ethical responses. She uses this instance of dependency to spotlight the moral goodness of Laura—the ever-patient caregiver—by once again showing her calmness when dealing with an emergency situation.

Several scholars have commented on the power of graphic novels to "reference the emotionally salient features of the story world, [which] provides opportunities for reader engagement via the reader's visual system" (Simpson 2018). The job of comic artists is to depict details such as gestures, postures, and facial expressions to provide visual evidence of the internal feelings and thoughts of story characters. Ben Blich (2013) describes how "images can greatly enhance the efficiency and effectiveness in the communication of emotions and elicitation of empathy" (para. 26). In *Special Exits*, Farmer uses Laura's almost-always present smile and relaxed body language to communicate the meaning and ethical goodness of dependency care. Another noteworthy example is presented in ***Figure 8***, which shows Laura giving her stepmother a sponge bath while sitting on the sofa (Farmer 2014: 132). As described in an earlier section, there is a period in the story when Rachel eats, sleeps, and interacts with her world from this sofa; one of Laura's caregiving responsibilities is to bathe Rachel without requiring her to move from it. In the novel Farmer shows the details of each step in the bathing process, which reveals Laura's proficiency and deep well of patience. Somehow she has developed the necessary skills and demeanor to make the bathing routine an enjoyable experience for her

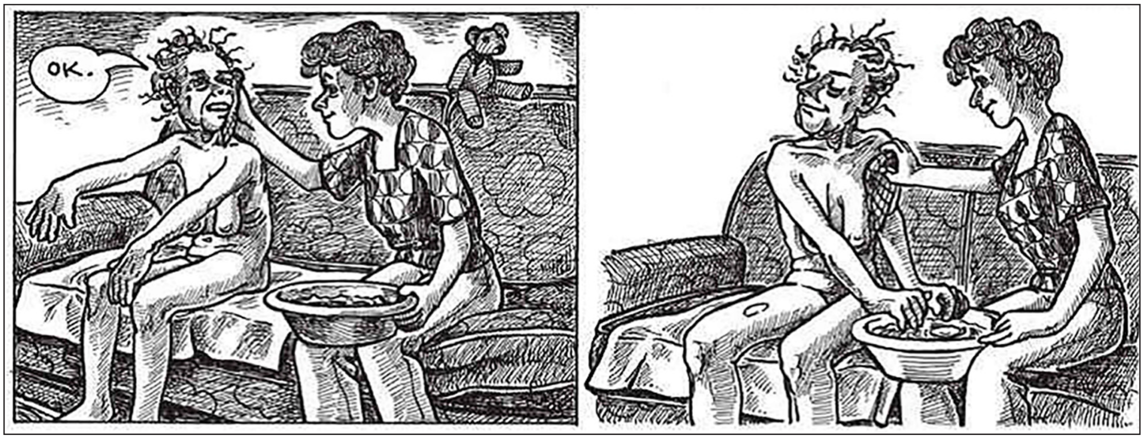

Figure 8 The joy of caregiving. From *Special Exits* by Joyce Farmer, Copyright © 2014 by Joyce Farmer. Image used with the permission of Joyce Farmer.

stepmother. The images of this process project an aura of love as expressed in both women's untroubled smiles. Farmer gives us access to an intimate moment between a stepmother and daughter, with Rachel completely at ease with her nakedness. Their facial expressions speak volumes about the ethical goodness of providing care for a dependent elder. Note that Farmer does not show Laura rushing off to her next task once the bathing is completed. Instead, the two women sit side-by-side, one elderly and naked, the other still young and vibrant, both smiling. Laura's expression projects positive energy into what could easily become a discouraging example of dependency.

In this manner, Farmer leads her readers to contemplate the effects of mindful caregiving offered to individuals who are conscious of their dependent statuses, and to consider other factors such as acceptance. Depending on others for basic needs is not a sign of weakness or inadequacy, but an opportunity for caregivers to practice the core value of compassion. The image of two women sharing an intimate moment after bathing expresses the potential for joy even as death approaches.

The bathing scene and many examples of dependency care in *Special Exits* allow us to consider the transformation of a *caregiving* narrative to one of *caregifting*. Farmer encourages her readers to reimagine the act of providing care as one of freely contributing to the receiver's well-being. There are multiple possible motivations for providing such gifts, including showing gratitude for care received when the gift-giver was an infant or in need of various kinds of support while growing up, or simply offering kindness in acknowledgment of the completion of a life-death cycle.

Care-gifting focuses on the connection-based relationship rather than on a give-and-take reciprocity when it comes to providing support to those in need. For example, for most of the novel Lars is the primary caregiver benefiting from the generous support provided by his daughter. As he becomes increasingly dependent, he serves as an example of a different way of dying, receiving support from a group of caregivers formed by Laura, who acts according to the *doula* principle as described by Eva Kittay. In Greek, *doula* originally meant a slave or servant, but today the word is used to describe anyone who renders a service to another (Kittay 1995: 17). Kittay (1999) argues that greater society has a responsibility to support caregivers: "Just as we have required care to survive and thrive, so we need to provide conditions that provide others—including those who do the work of caring—they receive the care they need to survive and thrive" (107).

The combination of dependency care ethics and the notion of *doula* "crips" ableist notions of individual productivity at rapid speed. Caring for aging-into-disability adults means working with time in terms of relational moments rather than adhering to strict standards or assumptions about progress and results. A connection-based ethic of dependency care thus provides a temporal and spatial alternative in situations where caregiving is acknowledged as having value. *Special Exits* offers a frame for understanding how the intersection of crip and care time takes ableist implications of normative time and transforms them into a type of time where older and/or disabled adults are cared for in environments that support a vision of care-giving as care-gifting. This is evident in the final chapters of *Special Exits*, in which readers witness the strengths of family and community in providing care to Lars, who is suffering from the combination of physical frailty and lung cancer. In his final life stage he needs 24-hour care, which Laura cannot provide alone. To ensure an atmosphere of dignity and love, she organizes a team of caregivers that includes her husband, her children, and two friends, Barbara and Nick, whose contributions are particularly noteworthy because they are not family members. In ***Figure 9*** we see Barbara holding Lars' hand to let him know he is not alone and Nick imagining Lars as a young man, perhaps a reminder that he is not exempt from the same ending (Farmer 2014: 195).

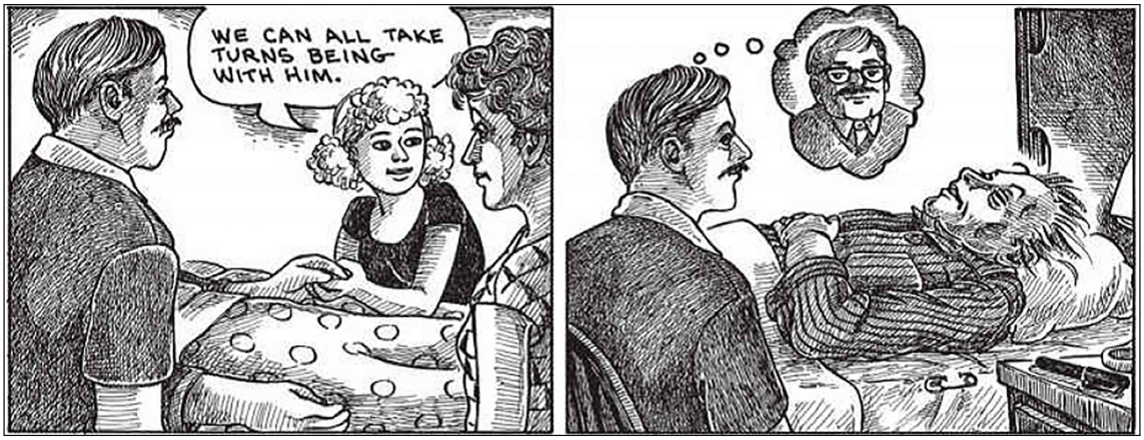

Figure 9 The value of *doula* in providing sustained care to the end of Lar's life. From *Special Exits* by Joyce Farmer, Copyright © 2014 by Joyce Farmer. Image used with the permission of Joyce Farmer.

Viewing caregiving as care-gifting is a fundamentally different way of interpreting acts of dependency care for older adults. Laura understands her father's wish to die at home, and views her dedication to fulfilling it as the best gift she can offer. She never begrudges her parents for the necessity of setting aside her own interests to attend to theirs—a powerful statement that *Special Exits* makes about the strengths required of adult children in response to the needs of aging parents. No one in the care team can possibly know how long it will take for Lars to die, they just know that the most meaningful gift they can give is to help him do so with dignity and surrounded by affection. Their dedication to this idea sets the stage for profound moments such as Laura's expression of gratitude for her father's support and guidance (***Figure 10***), one of several acknowledgments of the completion of the life-death cycle. Instead of viewing the task as a burdensome restriction on personal freedom, Farmer describes caregiving as a series of forward-moving transitional moments that will affect the lives of the caregivers long after the novel's final frame. The ending of *Special Exits* touchingly captures this dimension of care-gifting (Farmer 2014: 200).

Figure 10 Laura illustrates the meaning of care-gifting. From *Special Exits* by Joyce Farmer, Copyright © 2014 by Joyce Farmer. Image used with the permission of Joyce Farmer.

This image speaks powerfully to the notion of care-gifting. The cat on Laura's lap is called Ching—Lars' cat. From the beginning of the graphical novel, Ching has been unable to get along with Laura; it even bites Laura several times, causing deep wounds on her arms. However, because her father asks her to care for Ching, Laura keeps her promise and takes the cat into her home after his father's death. The last image of *Special Exits* illustrates a special moment when Ching slowly walks to Laura and curls up right in her lap. Laura is caught by this happy surprise, raising up her head to talk to her father and expressing gratitude for the unexpected gift—Lars' Cat—that is given back to her. The image of Laura and the cat enshrined in a sense of joy and celestial light illuminates the spirit of care-gifting, brightening up the world of family caregiving and completing the cycle of child-parent relationship. As the caregiving narrative of *Special Exits* begins with the cat biting Laura and ends with the cat curling up on Laura, the last image not only brings a perfect closure to the story but it also highlights the possibility of transforming care-giving to care-gifting.

VISUALIZING IMAGINED FUTURES

Despite their different focuses, aging-disability nexus, crip time, and dependency care lenses share one theme in common: they all reject ableist norms of independence, efficiency, productivity, and speed as too limiting and reductive to support the complex needs and experiences of disabled or aging individuals. *Special Exits* uses these lenses to rethink current responses to aging and disabilities. Joyce Farmer's realistic narrative rejects the many media images of "successful aging" that we are surrounded by, and refutes prevailing discourses that display aging-into-disability as a time of loss, dependence, burden, and personal failure. Instead of focusing on declining health and progressive losses in functionality, Farmer uses a crip time perspective to show how Lars and Rachel accept and adapt to their aging-into-disability experiences using the tools of slower speed, stasis, and equanimity. In this manner she confronts the vicissitudes of physical and mental decline to assert the value and resilience of individuals living with age-associated disabilities, and subverts negative interpretations and reluctant acceptance of aging as unproductive. *Special Exits* does not downplay the consequences of aging-into-disability, but it does describe crip time as having the potential for rejecting thoughts of personal failure, re-envisioning the present, and finding opportunities to express compassion and generosity. Farmer shares her perspective of the liberating potential of providing dependency care as a means of sustaining life and a sense of hope.

Special Exits confirms that the topics of aging, disability, and dependency care are worthy of aesthetic study and for constructing a counternarrative to fixed loss-and-failure images of aging-into-disability. Molly Andrews (2004) describes counternarratives as "stories which people tell and live which offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives" (1). Their power lies in their ability to imagine new possibilities for behavioral and social change. Mass-market graphic novels such as *Special Exits* are needed to offer insights into the lived experiences of aging adults and disabled individuals. It is in the telling and retelling of counternarratives that new stories and interpretations gain sufficient capacity to envision "imagined futures"[7] in which aging and disability are perceived as one part of nested relations, with dependency care serving "as a sort of prothesis that permits one to be independent" (Kittay 2011: 50).

The literature on caregiving often emphasizes the economic and social aspects of providing care for older adults, and frequently uses language that expresses a sense of crisis. *Special Exits* resists negative perceptions of dependency care as burdensome, and reframes it as a series of opportunities for connection that provide meaning for individuals experiencing aging-into-disability lives. Care work is slow work, and care time requires slow and consistent effort to resist ableist emphases on independence, productivity, efficiency, and speed. Farmer uses the decline of Lars to challenge this dependence/independence duality, showing how the acceptance of crip time can contribute to a peaceful and dignified death.

NOTES

1 The terms "comics" and "graphic novels" will be used interchangeably in this essay.

2 For an overview of the main critiques, see Marty Martinson and Clara Berridge's "Successful aging and its discontents: A systematic review of the social gerontology literature" (2015: 58–69).

3 Although Farmer did not use her father's and stepmother's names for the characters in *Special Exits*, she has described it as a graphic story about her experience of caring for her ailing elderly parents. See Josie Campbell (2011), Interview with Joyce Farmer, "Farmer Discusses "Special Exits." *CBR*, Feb. 8, 2011.

4 In our personal communications, Farmer repeatedly emphasized the importance of caregiving in the context of complexities faced by individuals who develop disabilities in the late stages of their lives.

5 I wish to thank Joyce Farmer for giving me permission to use images from *Special Exits* in this essay. See Mei-Yu Tsai (2021), *Email Message to Author*.

6 In one of my email exchanges with Farmer, she wrote, "While I was writing the memoir, I realized that my father was expending a considerable amount of his valuable energy to teach me how to care for him and my stepmother. Many times, he would make sure that I was aware of various problems and how he had solved them in the past. He was an amazing grown-up, mature and kind. I was lucky to have his thinking to guide me." See Tsai (2021), *Email Message to Author*.

7 In "Introduction: Imagined Futures" to her acclaimed book *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Kafer argues that disability and disabled bodies are often considered as "out of time" and written out of the future, so there is a need to imagine subaltern temporalities within which disabled people can be with "time" and flourish. Kafer (2013) contends that "the task… is not so much to refuse the future as to imagine disability and disability futures otherwise, as part of other, alternate temporalities that do not cast disabled people out of time, as the sign of the future of no future" (34).

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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