

COVID-19 AND THE TEMPORALITY OF CRISIS: ANALYSING THE COMIC ANTHOLOGY *COVID CHRONICLES*

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Abstract

This paper probes into the temporal disruption caused by the invisible storm, COVID-19, through an analysis of the comic anthology Covid Chronicles (2021), edited by Kendra Boileau and Rich Johnson. By examining the autobiographical, biographical, and fictionalised accounts of the lived experience expressed in graphic form, this paper explores the shift from the familiar to the new normal and from the cult of speed to the cult of the slow. The study of the various comics in the anthology highlights the effect and affect of the pandemic on quotidian/everyday life. Drawing on cultural inquiries such as the temporality of crisis and the slow movement, the paper argues that COVID-19 cannot merely be seen as a biological crisis but as nothing less than a lifestyle revolution.

Keywords: covid-19, comics, crisis of the temporal, cult of speed, cult of slow,

Introduction

Time present and time past
Are both present in time future,
And the future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable. (Eliot, lines 1-5)

Natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, cyclones, floods, and famine; social crises like poverty, refugees, and discrimination; political crises including war, terrorism, and civil unrest; economic crises such as inflation, market crashes, and recession; environmental crisis, namely, climate change, pollution, and deforestation; and health crises including pandemic, epidemics, public health emergencies incidentally and evidentially impact the temporality, spatiality and routine of the everyday life. COVID-19, the mightiest health crisis of our era, created a rupture in the "lifestyle, consumption and social interactions/relations" (Nayar 26) of everyday life. The era where men went to Mars shifted to being ordered to stay at home; humans—the social animals—were socially distanced; the hoarding generation faced shortages; the skyrocketing market crashed; faces, the index of the mind, were covered with masks—preferably N95; mobility and commuting halted; curfews were imposed; barricades were erected; vaccines were administered, and yet people continued to die.

Caught between the microbes, the tiny, fragile human society became socially distanced, mentally disturbed, economically unstable, physically exhausted, and medically challenged.

Our past became disjointed during the crisis, the future was a delusion, and the present was halted. Of the COVID-19 and its impact on the temporality, Arundhati Roy wrote,

Whatever it is, coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could. Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to "normality", trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. *But the rupture exists* (emphasis added). And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality. (46)

In accordance, the most repeated actions, the most travelled journeys, and the most inhabited spaces that make up the day-to-day, as highlighted by Highmore in *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (1) disturbed. This disturbance, referred to metaphorically as the 'great pause' or 'global freeze', did slow down everyday life in contrast to the speed of its contagion nature. Having said that, this paper aims to probe into the halt, rupture, slow movement, new normal, and the crisis in

the temporality brought about by the pandemic, as illustrated in the comic anthology *Covid Chronicles*. This paper will be presented in two sections: i) "New as in New Normal: On Normality and Temporality of COVID-19" and ii) "Cult of Speed and the Cult of Covid: On Slow Movement in the Air." The first section explores the evolution of the catchphrase "new normal" and emphasises its significance during the coronavirus pandemic. The second section focuses on speed and slowness, depicting how comics embrace slowness amidst crises.

Text

Caught in the maze of COVID-19, librarians, authors, professors, illustrators, cartoonists, and healthcare workers, who had much to express, utilised comics – often referred to as the ninth art – as a medium to depict the invisible storm. Kendra Boileau, the publisher of Graphic Mundi, and Rich Johnson, a former member of the Eisner Awards jury, called for pandemic-themed comics during this critical period, resulting in the compilation of the *Chronicles* from "mid-April 2020 to mid-October 2020 (150)." Chronicling the everyday experiences, some of the comics in the anthology are autobiographical, biographical, pathographical, or fictionalised based on true events. They are "documentary, memoiristic, meditative, lyrical, fantastic, and speculative, offering a view onto the countless ways the COVID-19 pandemic has changed life"(16). Consisting of more than three scores of graphic narratives, "*COVID Chronicles: A Comic Anthology*" (2021, hence forth *Chronicles*) is about "getting COVID-19 and recovering from it, about losing someone to it, adjusting to home-schooling, being furloughed, working the front lines, getting evicted, reliving past trauma, witnessing police brutality, and protesting for social justice" (16). These comics also reveal the pure fear, anxiety, and grief so many of us are experiencing these days— feelings that will no doubt be with us for years to come (Boileau and Johnson 16). This paper aims to examine the anthology from the context of COVID-19 and its friction/disruption with temporality.

Normal as in New Normal: On Normality and Temporality of COVID-19

With the addition of the word "new," the "new normal" became a catchphrase during various historical crises, from political and economic to biological contexts. The term "new normal" was used in the context of the First World War, the deadliest conflict in history. One such usage in the context of the First World War can be found in a bulletin featured in December 1918 in the National Electric Light Association titled "Beware!" attributed to a certain Henry Wise Wood:

To consider the problems before us we must divide our epoch into three periods, that of war, that of transition, that of the *new normal*, which undoubtedly will supersede the old. The questions before us, therefore, are broadly, two: How shall we pass from war to the *new normal* with the least jar, in the shortest time? In that respect should the *new normal* be shaped to differ from the old? (emphases added). (Wood)

Following this historical precedent, the USA employed the term "new normalcy" to describe its heightened security measures in the aftermath of 9/11. Subsequently, the dot-com crash of 2002 introduced the phrase into investment circles. When the financial crisis of 2008 disrupted everyday life, the term resurfaced. In 2014, Chinese economic policy adopted it as a slogan (Gupta 2022; Manuti et al. 2022). Admittedly, the catchphrase gained renewed significance during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath when the entire world faced unprecedented upheaval. The hashtag "New normal is not so normal" ruled the digital space during the pandemic. Daily, weekly, and monthly, there was conspicuously atleast an article or write-up on the new normal, to name a few: *The New Yorker's* "Why We Love the New Normal"; *The Hindu's* "The New Normal" and "Towards a New Normal: On Unlock 3"; and, *The New York Times's* "Gearing Up for the 'New Normal'". Of the risk of normalising the coronavirus, an article under Medical Dispatch penned by a doctor has argued:

If this is our new normal, I worry. What do we lose if we allow ourselves to become numb? In the early days of the pandemic, I was nervous but excited to be caring for the first critical cases of COVID-19; now these cases can

feel typical, common, part of a pattern, in conformity with a rule. I send labs, I order X-rays, I intubate. Over the Memorial Day weekend, more than three thousand new deaths due to COVID-19 were reported across the country, each one a mother, a husband, a brother, a neighbour, a deacon, a teacher—a whole galaxy of human life wrecked by a dangerous plague that's on the loose and against which we have tools to use if only our government would give them to us. To normalise this is to invite complacency, and complacency, as much as the virus itself, ought to be our enemy. (Connor)

In *Chronicle*, four comics directly deal with the new normal; they are Rob Kraneveldt and Mike Garcia's *My New Normal: Rinse & Repeat*, Ian Williams' *New Model Consultation*, Annie Zhu and Richard You Wu's *A New Reality* and Roland Burkart's *New Life*.

"My New Normal," crafted by a Canadian graphic novel writer, has earned accolades for his previous work, "Lifer," including the prestigious Writer of the Year and Best Story awards. Collaborating with Rob Kraneveldt and Mike Garcia, "My New Normal" spans two pages with 53 panels, aptly subtitled "Rinse and Repeat," and unfolds in the ambiguous setting of "Anywhere." The narrative offers a glimpse into a woman's daily life in self-isolation, whose profession revolves around "Blogging from home about fashion (190)." The opening panel captures the woman, later identified as Abigail, who is nestled in bed, embodying the familiar routine and mundanity with a bed, table, and study lamp, and cocooned within a blanket. A speech bubble declares 'Carpe Diem. Time to seize the day!' (189), but her awakening reveals the 11 a.m. clock prompting anxiety about potential lateness. In the subsequent panel, she vocalises her unease with a speech bubble exclaiming, "Crap!" followed by a determined declaration of "must... have... coffee..." (189). As she brews coffee, vapours rise from the cup while she gazes out the window. The day unfolds with series of unfortunate events such as shopping, out-of-stock items, and inflationary pressures. In a fabricated blog post, she however describes her day as seamlessly fitting into her newfound routine, masking any underlying issues she may be facing.

The protagonist is noticeably caught in the web of the new normal. She tries to cope with challenging change. Just as the new normal alters the everyday life of the world, so does the woman in the comic. The anxiety and angst on the woman's face explain the struggle of the rupture. The comic illustrations of out-of-stock, limitation, and inflation reflect the disruptions in the supply chain. The fear of losing loved ones, such as the protagonist's mother and father, the fear of getting infected by the contagion, the fear of holding the trolley, and the fear of stepping out capture how the new normal has changed the individual's everyday life. The content of the panel with the blog reads:

Blog entry: April 2020-04-19

HUGE day today!

Took care of my wonderful mother, got my daily exercise in, did my part to support the economy.

Tried out a new hairstyle, cooked a lovely, healthy dinner and watched a thought-provoking program on the BBC.

Wonder what tomorrow will bring?

Stay safe everyone

and keep positive.

Love, Abigail. (194)

During the "new normal era," digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and others experienced a significant user surge. However, this increase also brought with it a heightened risk of misinformation. Vox noted that "Facebook was the public square in this new normal. Groups, chats, and Reddit are the bars, clubs, and community centres." While some content on these platforms offered comfort to people, much of it was fabricated, misguided, and false. Of the new normal and social media Boston-based tech wrote: "The new normal, where many more of our daily interactions are mediated by screens, has made us change the way we behave on those platforms, with the messiness and realities of pandemic life crowding out some of social media's posturing and perfection (Molla)". While some content on these platforms provided solace to people, much of it was fabricated, misguided, and false. For instance, the last panel in this comic represents waking up at 11 am, browsing Netflix, and consuming junk, but the fabricated

blog post states otherwise (i.e. exercise, healthy dinner and BBC program).

The new normal has permeated various aspects of everyday lives, with telehealth being one such instance. Both medical and grey literature have identified telehealth as a practical option for diagnosis and prognosis during the pandemic (Monaghese and Hajizadeh, 2020; Shaver 2022). However, despite its potential benefits, its implementation has significant barriers, including patient privacy, confidentiality, data accuracy, misdiagnosis, provider-patient relationships, medical liability, fraud, and abuse (Gajarawala and Pelkowski, 2020).

In "New Model Consultation ", Dr Ian Williams explores the facet of telehealth during the pandemic. With the transition from offline to online brought by the virus, consultations have followed suit, mirroring the shift seen in schools, offices, and libraries. Telemedicine does emerge as a paradox among the practitioners of medicine and the preachers of medical humanities, for whom over-technology is one of the targets for dehumanisation. In a normal society/pre-pandemic era, communication failure is one of the lamentations of a patient. Colin Robertson and Gareth Clegg in "Storytelling in Medicine" write that in any survey of patient experience, communication failure comes high on the list: "The doctor looked at the screen, not at me", "I was talked at, not with", "I was asked a list of questions and expected to answer Yes or No", and "Nobody listened to my story"(10). However, in the pandemic era, where physical contact poses a threat, everything has turned to tele- solutions, including telemedicine. Despite its benefits, Ian Williams, a physician and the founder of Graphic medicine, a literary subgenre, depicts the uncertainties and complexity of such endeavours. Spanning three pages with 24 panels, it portrays through its characters the collective challenges faced by people who find themselves in the kingdom of illness and sickness. Monthly checkups are denied, medications are out of reach, surgeries are delayed, and assurance denied - the pandemic gave a double blow to those with chronic illnesses and other illnesses. Some patients were comfortable with such tele facilities, while others found it hard. The text preceding the panels on the second page of the comic highlights this

Most people are profoundly grateful just to speak to a doctor on the phone. The occasional patient, however, seems oblivious to the NEW REALITY of the pandemic... (253).

Subsequent panels depict a teleconsultation between a woman in pain and a physician. The physician protagonist (possibly resembling Dr. Ian Williams himself) sits in front of the computer. At the same time, the woman, in her vulnerable state, calls him to inquire about the results of her hip scan due to her constant pain. However, the physician on the other side of the telecommunication does not have the results. The anguished woman complains about the hospital ignoring her calls and pleads with the physician to convince the hospital to proceed with the operation. The physician states that it is not possible. Despite understanding the precarious situation of the woman, the physician is bound by the priority of controlling the virus and diagnosing COVID-19. As the text at the beginning of the third page reads:

With a couple of comorbidities, this lady should be shielding. But, trapped in her world of medical dependency, she cannot help but demand action (254).

Contrarily, the 'New Life' by Roland Burkart deals with the positive side of telemedicine. "New Life", with its optimistic tone, talks about how, despite the stress of COVID-19, there are more than 39,400 babies born as of Sept. 1, 2020, in Switzerland. Burkart himself fathered a child during the pandemic. With this as the context, the comic presents a positive side of telemedicine where the couple is all set to give birth to their child. The doctor, supposedly obstetrics, emerges as an empathetic doctor, not of the Tolstoy stereotypes. The compassionate tone of the physician behind the screen ensured hope for the couple.

Of self-care culture in modern times in the comic "Self Care", the homeschooling in "Quarantine Week", the reading culture in "Libraring During a Pandemic", remote work in "Lessons Learned", and the other comics in the collection like a historian documented the new normalcy. These also telltales how the disruption of temporal rhythms induced by COVID-19 has brought not just biological but also psychological, social, economic, and political effects.

Psychologically, it has heightened anxiety, fear, and uncertainty. Economically, it has led to job loss and instability. On the technological front, it has widened the digital divide and increased screen time. Additionally, the intersectionality of these issues has further marginalised specific communities.

Cult of Speed and the Cult of Covid: On Slow Movement in the Air

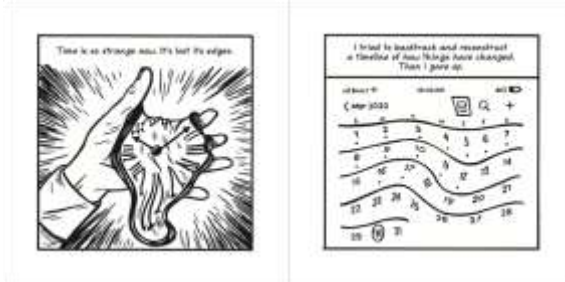


Figure 1 Jesse Lambert's "Covid Dawn"

Honore (2004), in his *In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed*, emerges as a manifesto of the slow movement. Juxtaposing fast, which is "busy, controlling, aggressive, hurried, analytical, stressed, superficial, impatient, active, quantity-over-quality", Honore puts slow, which is calm, careful, receptive, still, intuitive, unhurried, patient, reflective, quality-over-quantity. He adds that slow also means making "real and meaningful connections - with people, culture, work, food, everything" (15). He writes that slow movement is not about doing everything at a snail's pace or Luddite's resistance to industrialisation but rather about finding a balance. In an interview with *The Saturday Evening Post* regarding the slow movement and COVID-19, Honore said the pandemic was the largest experiment in slowness yet. He added that, though it is a nightmare, "There is a good side to it. People are now more into slow pursuits like biking, baking bread, sitting around the table with their family" (Neuhaus).

With chapters delving into the cultural significance of speed, machine speed, unruly speed, and media speed, Tomlinson (2007) embarked on an often overlooked examination of the condition of speed/immediacy in his book *The Culture of Speed: The Coming of Immediacy*. Similarly, Babauta (2011) outlined ten essential rules for a

slower-paced life as a rebellion against the prevailing fast-paced lifestyle. This list encapsulates the characteristic features of slow culture: doing less, being present, disconnecting, focusing on people, appreciating nature, eating slower, driving slower, finding pleasure in anything, single-tasking, and breathing. Through numerous discourses, the slow movement has emerged as an agency against the prevailing cult of speed. This movement gained momentum, particularly during the pandemic, consciously or unconsciously. The outbreak of the coronavirus abruptly disrupted the world's familiar everyday routines. Consequently, the generation accustomed to worshipping nonstop speed, epitomised by fast meals, fast deals, fast cars, and fast internet, was compelled to slow down.

Many comics in the anthology embrace the "slow movement," a cultural revolution against the notion that faster is always better (Honore 15). Emily Steinberg's "Ring the Bells" is one such comic of many in the *Chronicles*. The slow movement of the pandemic is captured magnanimously by Emily Steinberg in her "Ring the Bells". The narrative begins by portraying mankind suddenly cast as the main characters in their own dystopian horror films in nanoseconds, as COVID-19 spreads akin to Albert Camus's *Plague*, silently infiltrating country roads, high buildings, and subways across continents. Steinberg highlights how modern life's frenetic pace halts collectively under the grip of the virus. Reflecting on this emergence of the slow movement, "Ring the Bells" questions whether humanity can learn to slow down and forge new ways of loving. It depicts the sudden halt of contemporary life's frenzied pace, advocating for rebuilding damages and embracing a more mindful approach to consumption. Of the slow movement that emerged during COVID-19, this comic reflects how "The Frenetic Hamster wheel of modern life stops short...And we collectively grind to a halt". The narrator mirrors Slow Culture's plea and puts rhetoric to the reading audience.

"Can we learn to slow down?

Can we forge a new way of loving?"(50).

After pondering, the narrative depicts the fast-paced nature of contemporary life grinding to a halt, advocating

for rebuilding damages, rewiring brains, and adopting a more mindful approach to consumption. Given that the slow movement overlaps with the anti-globalisation crusade (Honore), "Ring the Bells" attacks industrialisation and the fast-paced nature of modern life. The three panels contain images of closed factories, empty roads, and clear skies, where birds are heard over the traffic sirens. The comic is accompanied by the following text, urging humankind to learn their timely lesson:

"Factories are closed and there's no smoke belching out into the air.

Roads are empty... Skies are clear...

Pollution is way down...

Is there a way to keep it this way when we get back to normal?". (51)

Similarly, Sarah Fifth's comic "State of Emergency" delves into the theme of slowness amidst crisis. Set in Australia, it portrays the aftermath of a bushfire followed by the onset of COVID-19. Amidst multiple crises ranging from housing insecurity, debt, unemployment, poverty, inequality, displacement, extremism, infectious diseases, extreme weather, injustice, climate change, and economic collapse, the protagonist decided to slow down-she decided to make no plan, put down her phone, and breathe. Firth's narrative emphasises the importance of small, deliberate actions during times of crisis, highlighting the emergence of discoveries and joys amidst uncertainty. The protagonist's shift towards focusing on the present and staying calm amidst chaos underscores the transformative power of slowness. Both comics offer a poignant exploration of the slow movement amid the pandemic, urging readers to reconsider the value of time, mindfulness, and connection in a world accustomed to constant mobility.

Jesse Lambert in "Covid Dawn" is set in the author's hometown of Jackson Heights, dubbed the "epicentre of the epicentre" of the global COVID-19 pandemic. By tracing the virus's journey from "being 'over there' to being everywhere" (41), Lambert renders the rupture of temporality during the crisis as follows:

Suddenly our world changed completely.

And the future became uncertain.

Time is so strange now. It's lost its edges.

I tried to backtrack and reconstruct a timeline of how things have changed. Then I gave up. (41-42)

In one of the panels, there is a sketch of time losing its edges and melting away from the hand. The melting away of the clock might remind us of the surrealist work "The Persistence of Memory," which symbolises the omnipresence of time. The plight of the protagonist in this comic is universal. When the pandemic hit, suddenly, the world, the quotidian, and the hamster wheel changed utterly; the supposedly promised land with health insurance, EMI, and share markets suddenly became a luminous halo; the panels in the thumbnails rightly depict the temporality of the coronavirus crisis.

The cult of speed being halted occurs as a *leitmotif* through the *Covid Chronicles*. "Meditations" criticise the concentric habits spinning in our brains and heads, causing us to forget to "breathe". As the apocalypse arrived as a rite of passage, the world tilted, time jolted, and mankind stopped. After which, the "Meditations" reflect how things changed with the world. The perspectives have changed, personal space has evolved, healthy distance has persisted, and the future remains uncertain, like spider hands in silk thread.

Walter Benjamin's description of World War's impact best describes the minds of pandemic-stricken society:

It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences. One reason for this was taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences. One reason for this phenomenon is obvious: experience has fallen in value. And it looks as if it is continuing to fall into bottomlessness... With *the [first] World War* a process began to become apparent which *has not halted since then*(emphasis added). Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent - not richer, but poorer in communicable experience?... For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, or moral experience by those in power. A generation that has gone to school on horse-drawn streetcars now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and

beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body. (Benjamin)

If the term "world war" were replaced with "COVID-19," it would be appropriate to describe the experience of humankind caught by the microbe, where billions were affected and millions lost their lives. Analogous to Benjamin's analysis of war, the impact of the pandemic has not halted since then. The generation for whom nothing could slow down time, with all the hustle and bustle, and the ebb and flow was completely undone by the virus. Consequently, the cult of speed was challenged and gradually supplanted by the cult of slowness. The great pause was an unfortunate blow, yet a timely lesson for the bullet-train generation to appreciate the stillness amidst the rush.

Conclusion

Carl Honore, the pioneer of the "slow movement", in his "In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed", writes, "WHAT IS THE VERY FIRST THING you do when you wake up in the morning? Draw the curtains? Roll over to snuggle up with your partner or pillow? Spring out of bed and do ten push-ups to get the blood pumping? No, the first thing you do, the first thing everyone does, is check the time. From its perch on the bedside table, the clock gives us our bearings, telling us not only where we stand vis-à-vis the rest of the day, but also how to respond. If it's early, I close my eyes and try to go back to sleep. If it's late, I spring out of bed and make a beeline for the bathroom. Right from that first waking moment, the clock calls the shots. And so it goes, on through the day, as we scurry from one appointment, one deadline, to the next. Every moment is woven into a schedule, and wherever we look—the bedside table, the office canteen, the corner of the computer screen, our own wrists—the clock is ticking, tracking our progress, urging us not to fall behind. (Honore 40) In the battle of daily life, the clock assumes the role of a general, commanding its army of twelve soldiers, each representing a multitude of checklists framing the schedule, fixing tenure, deciding deadlines, and calling off tasks. It orders us into action/inaction, sparing nothing inbetween. However, when disruption strikes in the

environment, where the crises emerge the temporality gets ruptures, leaving humanity disjoint, much like a kingdom without its emperor. As a result the past, present, and future collide, nullifying each other in the chaos. The disruption of temporal rhythms induced by COVID-19 has unleashed psychological, social, economic, and political effects. Psychologically, it has heightened anxiety, fear, and uncertainty, as depicted in the comics mentioned above. Economically, it has resulted in job loss and instability. On the technological front, it has widened the digital divide, increased screen time, mindless scrolling and FOMO. Additionally, the intersectionality of these issues has further marginalised certain communities. When normalcy itself is crowned with the prefix "new," things fall apart, and the centre cannot hold. The comic "Covid Dawn" illustrates the slimy, melting away of time in the hand of man haplessly lost in the crises of temporality. Thus, the coronavirus cannot just be seen as a biological crisis, but nothing less than a lifestyle revolution; the lifestyle fueled by the progress of technology, the roar of industry, and the colonies of commodification are now paused. For this, the selected anthology *Covid Chronicles* serves as a sylvan historian and testifies.

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