

## Splitting Selves: Crip Time and the Temporalities of Disability in Georgia Webber's *Dumb: Living Without a Voice*

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### ABSTRACT

In the graphic narrative *Dumb: Living Without a Voice* (2018), Canadian cartoonist Georgia Webber explores her acquired physical disability after a severe vocal injury leaves her voiceless. As a talkative, social young woman working as a café server, Georgia's life is interrupted when she is forced to adapt herself to a different way of navigating the world. Previous scholarly work has analyzed *Dumb* to articulate a connection between comics theory and disability rhetoric (Dolmage and Jacobs 2016) and explored its fruitful linkage between voice/voicelessness and identity (Venkatesan and Dastidar 2020). Building on the path opened by these scholars, the aim of this paper is to critically examine the representation of disability and its engagement with the concept of crip time in *Dumb* by drawing on the interdisciplinary fields of disability studies, crip theory, and comics theory. The first section of this paper will build on Alison Kafer's formulation of the strange temporalities of disability (2013) to investigate the ways in which Webber constructs non-conventional layouts where she incorporates different formal elements to present Georgia's lived experience of disability as a disruption of conventional temporalities. Special attention will be paid to the endless, frustrating routine of paperwork to apply for disability welfare that the protagonist faces when her condition renders her unable to work. In the second section, I will draw on the work of Ellen Samuels (2017) to examine how Webber negotiates her shifting identity by graphically splitting her embodied self on the page, composing a parallel timeline where she visualizes

her pre-disabled and disabled selves. The power of the pictorial is also extended to Webber's clever usage of color: while her cartoonish drawings appear in black and white, she employs red to draw Georgia's inner voice and her pain. Finally, my last section will employ the conception of crip time developed by Petra Kupperts (2014) to explore Georgia's reconnection with herself through her breathing exercises and her orientation towards artistic creativity. Overall, I will argue that *Dumb* does not present a narrative of recovery, as Georgia does not heal from her injury but engages instead with her disabled existence by turning inwards and depicting her voice (lessness).

### Keywords

Georgia Webber; *Dumb*; Canadian Comics; Graphic Narrative; Disability Studies; Disability; Illness; Crip Time.

In the graphic narrative *Dumb: Living Without a Voice* (2018), Canadian cartoonist and editor Georgia Webber explores her acquired physical disability after a severe vocal injury damages her throat, leaving her voiceless. Composed of eight self-published paperback issues later compiled in the 2018 edition by Fantagraphics, *Dumb* portrays the author's struggles with the loss of her voice and its disconcerting aftermath. As a talkative young woman that works as a café server, volunteers at a bike co-op, and loves singing and going out with her friends, Georgia's<sup>1</sup> life comes to a halt when her injury leads her to a new way of navigating the world. Thus, confronted with her persistent throat pain and the uncertainty of her diagnosis, Georgia must deal with the loss of her job, the hardships of learning to communicate without her voice, and her new shifting identity.

Canadian comics have a productive history full of national and international successes, building on the culture of alternative comics that emerged in Toronto in the decades of 1970 and 1980 (Rifkind and Warley 3). Nowadays, the multiplicity of voices and backgrounds in Canadian comics has enhanced the power of the medium, with several generations of Canadian authors "earning places on best-of and bestseller lists" (Gray 69). *Dumb* is heir to this success, belonging also to the rich tradition of female cartoonists working in autobiographical accounts and representing their subjectivities in the hybrid medium of comics, composed of the interactions between the verbal and the visual (Chute, *Graphic Women* 5). More specifically, autobiographical comics that engage with disability and illness—written by women and men alike—take advantage of this boundless medium to closely engage with bodily and mental

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1. Given the autobiographical nature of this text, I will employ the name "Georgia" to refer to the protagonist of the story, and the surname "Webber" to refer to the author that is drawing and writing the pages of this graphic narrative.

matters. According to Hillary Chute (2017), graphic narratives about disability and/or illness have multiplied in the last twenty years, owing to the capacity of comics to “make visible both external features of a condition, and internal, cognitive, and emotional features that are hard to communicate otherwise” (*Why Comics* 241-243). Similarly, Susan Squier (2008) states that due to their usage of verbal and gestural expression, “comics can convey the complex social impact of a physical or mental impairment, as well as the way the body registers social and institutional constraints” (74). Thus, the act of drawing and redrawing the body on the white surface of the page allows cartoonists to breathe life into their subjective life experiences and to probe issues related to normative standards of health, physical appearance, mental distress, or ability.

A central characteristic of this hybrid form is that the narrative moves “forward in time through the space of the page, through its progressive counterpoint of presence and absence: packed panels . . . alternating with gutters (empty space)” (Chute, “Comics” 452). In this manner, comics proves to be convenient for the articulation of the temporalities that spring from disability and illness. In fact, a crucial aspect of *Dumb* is its dynamic rendition of the passage of time, which the author exploits through her enthralling graphic style: Webber combines both orderly, clean panels and layouts with messy compositions, dark scratches, and a lack of gutter or division between panels. This interesting formal disparity allows her to inscribe—and play with—the different temporalities that spring from the process of becoming accustomed to living with an acquired disability. Moreover, the whiteness of the page is punctuated by her striking two-color palette: while she employs black as the main color of the book—to draw the characters and backgrounds, the frames or panel borders, and to write the text contained in captions and word balloons—red is used to convey Georgia’s emotional and physical pain as well as her voice. The combination of these pictorial elements produces a valuable graphic narrative that exploits the verbal and the visual to convey the author’s innermost reflections and feelings about the uncanny, frustrating experience of losing her voice.

Scholars such as Jay Dolmage and Dale Jacobs (2016) have analyzed *Dumb* to articulate a connection between comics theory and disability rhetoric, while Sathyaraj Venkatesan and Diptarup Ghosh Dastidar (2020) have explored its fruitful linkage between voice/voicelessness and identity, arguing that it “deepens the association between identity and voice” while accounting for the reality of living “in a state of perpetual pain and voicelessness for an indefinite period of time” (208). Building on the path opened by these scholars, the aim of this paper is to critically examine the representation of disability and its engagement with the concept of crip time in *Dumb* by drawing on the interdisciplinary fields of disability studies, crip theory, and comics theory. Born within the contestatory framework of crip theory, crip time has a strong connection with queer

ideas of temporality and entails an understanding of time and futurity that acknowledges that people with disabilities may not meet normative demands of time, pace, and scheduling in a world full of ableist barriers (Kafer, *Feminist* 26). The first section of this paper will build on Alison Kafer's formulation of the strange temporalities of disability (2013) to investigate the ways in which Webber constructs non-conventional layouts where she incorporates different formal elements to present Georgia's experience of disability as a disruption of conventional temporalities. Special attention will be paid to the endless, frustrating routine of paperwork to apply for disability welfare that the protagonist faces when her condition renders her unable to work. In the second section, I will draw on the work of Ellen Samuels (2017) to examine how Webber negotiates her shifting identity by graphically splitting her embodied self on the page, composing a parallel timeline where she visualizes her pre-disabled and disabled selves. Finally, my last section will employ the conception of crip time developed by Petra Kuppers (2014) to explore Georgia's reconnection with herself through her breathing exercises and her orientation towards artistic creativity. All in all, I will argue that *Dumb* does not present a narrative of recovery, as Georgia does not heal from her injury, but engages instead with her disabled existence by turning inwards and depicting her voice(lessness).

## The Temporalities of Disability

*Dumb* begins in May 2012, with Georgia sitting on a bus, coming back home after attending the Toronto Comics Art Festival (TCAF). "Wow," she says to herself. "I know I had a good time when my throat hurts this much. Gotta rest up" (Webber 6). Even though this sharp pain is the earliest sign of her injury, it does not deter her from pursuing her active social life—hanging out with her friends, attending parties, and going to work at a loud café (see Webber 6-9). However, the intensity of the sting of pain in her throat and her coughing fits increase as months go by, until Georgia cannot ignore them anymore. In September, the young woman finally decides to get an appointment to see a doctor, an encounter that Webber narrates in the chapter titled "Diagnosis," shown in Fig. 1.<sup>2</sup> "It's a really strong, general pain, it's just there all the time," Georgia explains to her doctor while sitting at his office. "If I talk too much, it goes all over my head and neck" (Webber 17). The layout of the page is divided into a

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2. All the images from *Dumb* used in this paper have been reproduced with the permission of the author and the publishing house Fantagraphics Books, who have also graciously sent me high quality versions of the pages analyzed here.

sequence of four frameless images, not encapsulated within panels nor divided into distinct rows. Six red-penciled word balloons are interspersed between them, containing the doctor's questions—"are you a singer? is the pain ever a burning sensation?" (17). Georgia's face is never seen on the page: instead, the reader first sees her nervous hands folded in her lap, then the doctor taking notes of her responses, Georgia's feet touching each other, and finally, a poster exhibiting anatomical depictions of the insides of a human mouth and throat, which occupies the lower part of the page.



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Fig. 1. Georgia responds to her doctor's medical inquiry (Webber 17). From *Dumb: Living Without a Voice*, p. 17. By Georgia Webber, Fantagraphics, 2018.

It is no wonder that Webber dedicates the second chapter of her book to the medical setting, as it is the first place that Georgia turns to when trying to

find some clarity about her physical discomfort. By employing a composition in which the protagonist's face is never seen on the page, Webber reproduces the sanitized environment of the doctor's office, where Georgia occupies her role as a patient in need of medical care for her ailments, who only resorts to answering the questions she is asked, and who sits still while the medical professional inserts a bronchoscope down her nasal cavities and throat (Webber 18). Her troubles and pain are cleanly summarized in the replies to the doctor's direct questions about her health. In medical settings, disability tends to be conveyed and explained by doctors and other health professionals through scientific information that "often usurp[s] the voice or perspective of the narrator and overwrite[s] their identity in scientific and pathological terms" (Dolmage and Jacobs 17). The medical posters and the anatomical images in the doctor's office also reinforce this idea, showing "disabled bodies [that] are cropped, dissected, their 'defective' parts put on display for the education of the viewer, their subjectivity removed" (17). However, by including Georgia's folded hands and feet, the author conveys the young woman's emotional status and displays her nervousness and discomfort to the reader: in these moments, she returns to being "Georgia" and not the unnamed patient with a vocal injury. On the next pages, the doctor finally gives a diagnosis for Georgia's pain: "You're what we call a vocal abuser, especially since you like to sing. This is an injury, one that takes a long, long time to heal..." (Webber 19). His last recommendations are to "get lots of rest" and to "drink lots of liquids" (19), and then Georgia is left alone to grapple with an injury with no prospect of healing soon—and with the fact that she must stop using her voice.

As she leaves the doctor's office, Georgia's mind is full of doubts, fears, and uncertainty about her present situation and about a future that now appears unfamiliar. But she does not have long to ponder it, as she soon faces the first setbacks caused by the loss of her voice: she is forced to quit her remunerated job as a café server and, after many rejections at "quieter jobs," she resorts to applying for disability welfare, which becomes a personal odyssey. Webber narrates these struggles through a long sequence that extends over the course of seven pages, detailing the steps that the young woman needs to follow in order to complete the proper procedures of the lengthy application process: "Step one: deliver documents to welfare office," reads the first caption, located above a panel that shows Georgia waiting in front of a window as a social worker examines her paperwork. This first step is soon followed by a second—"wait for letter requesting documents"—and a third one—"gather and organize documents. Repeat" (see Webber 87).

Then, the sequence continues on the next pages, with framed panels that enumerate and describe the many documents and guides that Georgia follows, along with the verbal instructions in French provided by the officers that



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continually send her back and forth to gather and fill out more paperwork (Webber 92-93). As shown in the double-spread in Fig. 2, several panels depict Georgia contemplating the many forms that she needs to write, making mental monetary calculations, receiving and sending emails, and making phone calls. It is also worth noting that the repetition of the different steps of the process are scattered through the two pages, not following a clear, orderly reading pattern: sequences of panels itemizing one of the steps are depicted within bigger sequences detailing other steps, recreating for the reader the excruciating efforts that these unending processes of application demand, as Georgia repeatedly visits the welfare office. The many detailed documents and forms that the protagonist sends also hold visual importance, occupying the lower part of the double-spread and overlapping with other panels.



Fig. 2. Applying for disability welfare (Webber 92-93). From *Dumb: Living Without a Voice*, pp. 92-93. By Georgia Webber, Fantagraphics, 2018.

Since her vocal injury and her subsequent disability are not immediately perceived by others, Georgia suffers the disablement produced by external structures such as the welfare office: at the top of the first page of the spread, an officer comments to her colleague that Georgia is “la femme qui ne parle pas” – or “the woman who does not speak” – and proceeds to ignore Georgia as

she fills out her forms (Webber 92). Georgia is thus a victim of what Alison Kafer (2003) identifies as the “cultural presumption of able-bodiedness,” in which individuals are always assumed to be able-bodied, unless they explicitly identify themselves as disabled or are “visually marked as disabled (for example, using a wheelchair or other mobility aid; carrying a white cane or accompanied by a service dog; or missing a limb or other body part)” (“Compulsory Bodies” 80). This presumption is extremely problematic for disabled people who, like Georgia, do not reproduce the cultural stereotype of disability, since it denies them medical and governmental help, “the support of friends and family, and hinders their inclusion within disability communities” (80).

The formal aspects of the previous figure also articulate the altered temporalities embedded in some experiences of illness and disability as theorized by scholars such as Kafer (2013), who acknowledges that disabled individuals may not meet normative understandings of time: for instance, “people with various impairments move or think at a slower (or faster) pace than culturally expected” (*Feminist* 34). Kafer draws on the work of queer theorist Jack Halberstam (2005), who observes that queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by imagining their futures outside of “the paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (2). Thus, queerness is understood a set of “strange temporalities” (1) that disrupt heteronormative expectations of time. Building on these ideas, Kafer suggests that disability, illness, and medical processes such as diagnosis and prognosis also entail the creation of strange temporalities. For some individuals, the process of inhabiting the world while ill and/or disabled may involve a sense of being hindered and “trapped” in a time that never seems to move forward: “The present takes on more urgency as the future shrinks; the past becomes a mix of potential causes of one’s present illness or a succession of wasted time; the future is marked in increments of treatment and survival even as ‘the future’ becomes more tenuous” (Kafer, *Feminist* 37).

Subsequently, Kafer proposes the term “time of undiagnosis” to refer to the lost time spent in “the shuttling between specialists, the repeated refusal of care and services, the constant denial of one’s experiences, the slow exacerbation of one’s symptoms, the years without recognition or diagnosis, the waiting” (*Feminist* 37). Precisely, Georgia faces this refusal of care, being forced to repeat the many steps and procedures that governmental welfare requires. Moreover, while Georgia does already have a diagnosis and a prescribed medical treatment, I would suggest that the process of welfare application narrated in the previous figure is inscribed into Kafer’s time of undiagnosis, since it becomes a draining, disabling labyrinth that renders Georgia invisible, a mere figure that moves between tasks and forms, her subjectivity and individuality removed. In order to recreate the taxing effects of Georgia’s daily routine of



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paperwork, calls, and emails, Webber connects “panels of the past and present to create a sense of eternal time, where a single page economizes events spanning across several earlier pages” (Venkatesan and Dastidar 213). By doing so, the composition of the double-spread collapses each of the steps to follow, reinforcing the continual cycle of welfare paperwork, the tedious amount of information that she must provide while being in a vulnerable situation, and her precarious economy—at the center, a framed panel shows Georgia paying for her groceries as she repeats to herself, “keep breathing.” Georgia is graphically imprisoned in the many different sequences that cross the two pages—in the eternal loop of filling out forms and waiting for responses and then trying again, receiving no answer to the written questions she always shows to the officer: “how long will it take?” (Webber 92). Unable to find answers to her questions, she keeps waiting and waiting, her present—and future—uncertain.

### “Who am I without it?”: Georgia and Her Split Selves

Georgia soon learns that the weariness brought by the time-consuming procedures of disability welfare also extends to other areas of her life. Overwhelmed, the young woman sits down to write a “to-do list” of the tasks that she must carry out, such as “warn friends,” “QUIT CAFÉ,” “silent jobs?” and “credit card” (Webber 27). It is worth mentioning that Georgia’s first instinct to adjust to her new reality is to split and organize her life into manageable tasks that she can carry out alone and that she can quickly visualize on a piece of paper. Most interestingly, this process of dividing and breaking down activities into blocks of time is also translated into the page—in a chapter that is precisely titled “Splitting.”

Webber begins by setting a long sequence that takes place over the course of five double-spreads, each of them divided into two distinct sections. In the first section, Webber portrays Georgia’s drawn self, split in two halves: first, she draws a version of Georgia delineated in the usual black ink used in the majority of *Dumb*. Then, when this black-lined Georgia breathes in, touching her shoulders with her eyes closed, she extracts an identical version of herself from her injured throat, completely penciled in bright red ink (Webber 28-29; see Fig. 3). When the black-penciled Georgia attempts to put the red-penciled Georgia—her “voice”—aside, ignoring her as she must avoid talking to heal from her injury, the red version of Georgia begins to retaliate, annoyed. The second section of the spread is presented right below this act of splitting, contained in framed, square panels where Georgia confronts her new life with an acquired disability: the horizontal sequence of six framed panels depicts Georgia riding a bike, quitting her job—“it’s too loud in here. I’m so sorry, I can’t work anymore,”

she explains to her manager (Webber 28)–crossing items off her to-do list and applying for a job at a video games company.



Fig. 3. The conflict between Georgia's split selves (Webber 28-29). From *Dumb: Living Without a Voice*, pp. 28-29. By Georgia Webber, Fantagraphics, 2018.

Dolmage and Jacobs point out that the upper part of the previous sequence visualizes the conflict between “two versions of Georgia in terms of silence (her new normal) versus sound (the voice that fights to be released, even though such release would be detrimental to physical recovery)” (21). By graphically splitting both her embodied self and the page layout in two halves, Webber reinforces the disruption that voicelessness brings to Georgia’s sense of self, simultaneously showing her struggles to rest her throat and the different actions and tasks that she must perform in order to adapt herself to an abled world. In doing so, Webber takes “advantage of the affordances of the comics form in which time is always represented visually, spatially, and materially, in specific sequences, [and] in the comic as a whole” (Dolmage and Jacobs 21-22). I would further suggest that this conflict engages with the definition of crip time provided by Ellen Samuels (2017): “crip time is broken time,” since “[i]t requires us to break in our bodies and minds to new rhythms, new patterns of thinking and feeling and moving through the world” (Samuels). Learning to navigate the world with her disability

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entails the loss of her job and her personal relationships, and the search for other jobs and occupations that accommodate her needs. As her drawn self is "broken" in two halves in the double-spread, Georgia is forced to adapt herself to the "new rhythm" imposed by her vocal injury, which demands lots of liquids, quiet environments, and most of all, repose.

Another enthralling example of Webber's rendition of her split graphic selves takes place in the chapter titled "In effect," which shows the morning after a Halloween party that Georgia helps to organize. Once again, the surface of the page is divided into two parts, each corresponding to a different timeline (see Fig. 4). While the first part is covered by a rectangular, framed panel that depicts Georgia reading a book in her living room, the six square panels of the lower part show her venting to one of her closest friends: "I don't want to be anyone's novelty... or to attract someone who wants me to be silent," she confesses to her friend (Webber 75, emphasis in original). Besides, these panels interchange close-ups of her friend's worried face and Georgia's crying one along with the big, red-penciled word balloons that contain their spoken conversation.



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Fig. 4. Splitting (Webber 75). From *Dumb: Living Without a Voice*, p. 75.  
By Georgia Webber, Fantagraphics, 2018.

The visual division of these pages accentuates Georgia's experience of disability, showing both her capacity to take care of herself while living alone, as well as her necessity to talk even when it can hurt her further. This demonstrates that Georgia has an active role when making daily decisions regarding the management of her health: while she needs to rest her throat in order to heal from her injury, she also weighs the pros and cons of talking and chooses to pour out her concerns and fears to her friend. Thus, Webber reveals the extent to which pain—both emotional and physical—is present in Georgia's daily life and how much she needs to take it into account every day—her every action bears that process of negotiation between feeling relief when using her voice and dealing with the physical pain of its strain. The previous figure is also one of the few examples in which Georgia actively seeks someone to vent to about her current situation: as observed in the lower part of the page, Georgia faces her new challenges completely alone—without the support of a partner, as her friend points out in the second panel. Fearing that she may only be desired because she is, at the moment, a “silent” woman, Georgia refuses to let new people into her life, and decides to avoid friendships and romantic connections at a stage in which she feels overwhelmed and vulnerable. However, in doing so, she refuses the company of people who may genuinely desire to have her as a partner, and also rejects relationships that can be beneficial for her. Throughout *Dumb*, Georgia never seems interested in reaching out to other disabled individuals who can help her to learn new strategies to cope in a speaking and hearing world, nor learns sign language, perhaps due to her hope that her injury may be temporary and will heal soon enough.

Georgia's split selves appear in other parts of *Dumb*, such as in the double-spread displayed in Fig. 5, where she complains to her doctor that she is receiving no help to manage her stress levels so as not to further damage her throat. First, the page on the left includes the doctor's instructions for Georgia—“you know your body is affected by stress, and I know it's hard, but there's not much I can do but tell you to relax” (Webber 126). The man sits still, with his hands on his knees. In the bottom left corner of the page, the top of Georgia's head can be seen, surrounded by the tiny stars that Webber employs to signal the young woman's throat pain. Then, the next page shows Georgia's voiced concerns: “if I can't talk, I... I have no job, no money, can't talk to my friends or anyone about my stress... what am I supposed to do? Nobody's helping me” (Webber 127). The protagonist is now portrayed through a frameless sequence at the center of the double-spread, in which her two selves—once again clearly demarcated through the usage of red and black inks—progressively merge and superpose each other, until both become undistinguishable, and until a dark stain is all that is left of Georgia. In the right corner—and diagonally opposed to the drawing of Georgia's head covered in stars—the figure of the doctor appears turned

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towards the border of the page, which suggests that he is exiting the scene and leaving Georgia alone as she crumbles.

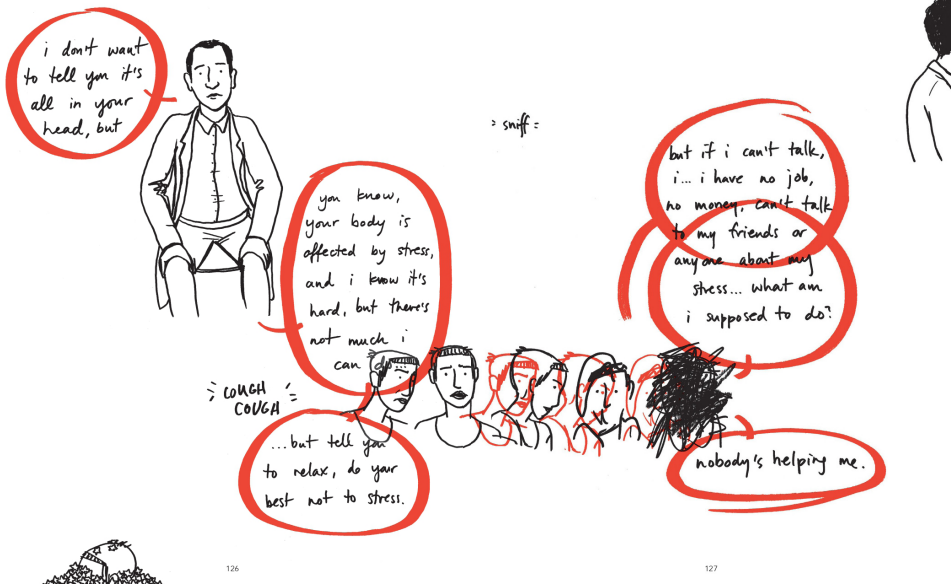


Fig. 5. "[N]obody's helping me" (Webber 126-127). From *Dumb: Living Without a Voice*, pp. 16-127. By Georgia Webber, Fantagraphics, 2018.

Webber takes advantage of the formal possibilities of comics to construct a layout comprised of frameless scenes through which the visual reinforces what Georgia is voicing in the last word balloon: that nobody is helping her, and that when she turns to the healthcare system for assistance, she finds no support, only indications that she must manage her stress levels to avoid physical pain—even when said stress levels are precisely caused by her pain and the dreadful uncertainty of her future. The composition also visualizes the wide distance between doctor and patient, stressing the idea that Georgia cannot find the relief she needs in the medical system. Whenever she asks them, the doctors and welfare officers that tend to her case always reply that it is impossible for them to know how long she is going to be injured: "... how long it'll be like this?" she urges another doctor, who shakes her head, "Just to make plans... any idea? Weeks? Months? You can't tell me" (Webber 145). Driven by the unknown duration of her injury and her overflowing anxiety, Georgia's anguish becomes the focal point of the double-spread, conveyed through Webber's trembling strokes and the dark, bold scratch that erases her face.

Torn between the requirement to rest her throat and her desire to talk and sing, Georgia's struggles to come to terms with her disabled identity become a notable pictorial motif throughout *Dumb*. As shown in Fig. 6, Webber cleverly employs her characteristic technique of breaking the graphic space of the page into two distinct sections to illustrate Georgia's innermost conflicts. On the top of the page, the author depicts a horizontal sequence that shows a swift transition from Georgia's childhood to her adult self. Drawn with longer hair and a skirt, this child version of Georgia appears next to her teenage and adult selves, each with different clothes and hairstyles. Except for the "present" Georgia, who is depicted with the usual black pen lines employed in the majority of *Dumb*, her past selves are drawn with thick crayon lines, all of them overlapping each other. Below, Webber replicates the image of her two split selves as shown in Fig. 3, but this time they are fighting against each other. Two big, red word balloons cross the page: "oh, it's so sad," reads the first one, containing the words that a close friend of Georgia utters. "[I]t's like you lost your superpower," the friend continues in the balloon located right below an exhausted, red-penciled Georgia (Webber 143). Different scratches and stains in both black and red cross the page, as if imitating the open, unfinished nature of a sketchbook that contains multiple scratches of rejected ideas and drafts.

Georgia's overlapping selves recall Samuels's understanding of crip time as "time travel": "Disability and illness have the power to extract us from linear, progressive time with its normative life stages and cast us into a wormhole of backward and forward acceleration, jerky stops and starts, tedious intervals and abrupt endings" (Samuels). Even though Georgia's selves are presented in a linear fashion from childhood to adulthood, the lack of panels and grids that contain the scene in a clean sequence suggests that Georgia is trapped in that "wormhole" in which she goes back and forth through different times of her life and through different selves—young and adult, voiced and voiceless, pre-disabled and disabled. Moreover, since the different drawings of Georgia overlap with one another, the visual quality of the previous figure seems to convey Georgia's difficulty to perceive herself as "whole" after her injury and the months of voicelessness completely changed the way she sees herself. No longer the chatty friend, the loud coworker, and the life of the party, Georgia cannot help but feel that she has lost an integral part of herself—her "superpower." Besides, this sense of loss is also motivated by the fact that, as time passes by, the chances of going back to the way she was before decrease, as she does not know whether her current situation is going to be permanent or not. As Webber reveals in an interview conducted by Kristi Valenti for *The Comics Journal* #305 (2020),



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Fig. 6. "It's like you lost your superpower" (Webber 143). From *Dumb: Living Without a Voice*, p. 143. By Georgia Webber, Fantagraphics, 2018.

There's a climax for me in the story—just in the passage of time and the realization of how deeply I felt my identity was linked to my voice. . . . It went from an immediate, acute situation that I was in that I thought would end soon . . . to something that felt like it was the new normal, the new permanent situation of my life. Then I was suddenly having to confront—and maybe let go of—all the things that I had felt were so strongly a part of my identity for so long. (Valenti 59-62)



These two elements mentioned by Webber—the passage of time and her voice as the core of her identity—are also transmitted in the previous figure through the interactions between the written word and the use of color. “Who am I without it?” reads the text directly written over Georgia’s transition from childhood to adulthood, “I’m the same, I think?” (Webber 143). These questions are connected to other scattered lines of text, also inscribed on the faces of the different “Georgias”: “but this but this is.” The sentence finishes on the right side of the page, as a big, red dot surrounded by red question marks contains the word “ME” (143). Georgia can no longer dwell in the “fixed,” stable identity that she has inhabited her whole life, since her acquired disability has forced her to negotiate and rework every aspect of her life.

### **“The slower you go, the more you’ll feel”: Creativity and Crip Time**

Soon after diagnosis, Georgia understands that managing verbal conversations has become a taxing task. She first resorts to methods of trial and error by employing notepads and white boards to communicate with her friends, neighbors, and coworkers without using her voice: “My instinctual preference is for pen and paper. I crave a replacement for the tactile experience of voice” (Webber 45). As a cartoonist, she quickly gets used to the physicality of the page, and she readily grabs her old high school notebooks and pens to write down the words that she needs to say to others. However, this practice also presents its setbacks, since not everyone is willing to read her notebook, nor patient enough to wait for her to finish writing: for instance, she is forced to leave an extremely loud party, completely exhausted after trying to communicate with a friend through her writing—the other woman does not bother to read or understand what Georgia is trying to convey: “Why won’t SHE LISTEN? Why won’t she leave me alone??” the protagonist asks herself, completely distraught (Webber 120).

Another problem lies in the fact that Georgia cannot quickly explain her situation to others, which bears a threat to her social life: “My circumstances are rare and easily misunderstood, especially to an outsider,” writes Webber in a sequence where Georgia worries that she is being rude when she cannot thank a stranger that opens a door for her, nor greet and talk to the friends that wave at her on the street (Webber 52). Georgia’s concerns are visually reinforced in Fig. 7, which shows a vertical sequence of three panels in which she berates herself for not realizing that one of her friends could not see her signaling and gesturing at him. Her thoughts are conveyed by the dashed border of the red word balloons, different to the usual smooth border of the balloons that contain her talk. A black, small smear appears next to Georgia’s back in the

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first panel, and gradually increases its size in the next two panels—while Georgia knits her brows, frustrated with herself—until it occupies most of the space in the frameless panel next to the sequence. There, Georgia lies on the floor, completely submerged in her thoughts. The small scribble has now grown into a big, dark blotch composed of thick lines that emanate from Georgia's body, engulfing the page in darkness.



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Fig. 7. Splashes of blank ink: Georgia's anxiety (Webber 53). From *Dumb: Living Without a Voice*, p. 53. By Georgia Webber, Fantagraphics, 2018.

While red is used throughout *Dumb* to convey Georgia's voice and sometimes her thoughts, black is employed in the previous figure to display her fears and anxieties. The taxing effects of avoiding speech to treat her injury are visualized in the dark shapes that crush Georgia's body and even erase her thoughts, as seen in the textual lines of the word balloons, which become unreadable—"how many people will I offend? Not again!! Old friends know, but new ones?" (53). Following medical advice and resting her throat lead Georgia to miss conversations and to offend abled friends and acquaintances who do not know about her injury and wait for her verbal responses. In addition, her struggles are exacerbated by the fact that she maintains no contact with other disabled individuals, as indicated in the previous section of this article. Thus, for the young woman, negotiating her voicelessness in a hearing and speaking world sometimes comes with frustration and anguish, which Webber shows by submerging her drawn self in darkness.

Georgia also wrestles with herself to represent her throat pain and her voice—and lack thereof—in her autobiographical work as a cartoonist. In the chapter titled "Contribution," she decides to take advantage of her need to stay at home to try and draw her experience of voicelessness and make herself the subject of her own work. "Right now, in this mess, the conditions are perfect," writes Webber in a sequence that depicts Georgia planning her comics work, "I have all this time, the need to be quiet, alone, something real and relevant to discuss" (162-163). However, the very act of grabbing her pens and sitting down to draw becomes another vast source of anxiety: "I remember a time in my life when drawing was relaxing" (Webber 160). Part of the creative block she suffers is due to the fact that, in order to narrate and share her story, she must draw herself on the page. Elisabeth El Refaie (2012) refers to the process through which cartoonists engage with their embodied identity as "pictorial embodiment" (51). Autobiographical comics have a special relationship with the physicality of the body and with body image, since cartoonists are required to "produce multiple drawn versions of one's self" (51) in order to draw and write their graphic memoirs. Thus, they produce many different self-portraits, drawing themselves "over again, often at different ages and stages of development and in many different situations" (El Refaie 62). As shown in the last part of *Dumb*, Georgia suffers the taxing procedures of drawing herself over and over: "... after a while, drawing yourself over and over and over gets really BORING. Then again, if I didn't show you the boredom, it would be less truthful" (Webber 168). To complement these words, Webber depicts her drawn self bent over her drawing board, surrounded by her art materials, and making drafts and sketches as she questions the validity of the creative process (see, for instance, Webber 158). Since Georgia's voice as a creator and cartoonist is affected—and informed—by her vocal injury, her struggles in the endless process of welfare

application, and her difficulty to communicate with others, she feels compelled to show the most boring and painful aspects of her life.

Yet Webber does not only show the negativity and the boredom of her reality of disability: the last part of *Dumb* introduces one of the most riveting articulations of Georgia's identity through the voice lessons that she attends with the hopes of managing her throat pain. Even though the protagonist is very skeptical of the goals of these sessions at first—she even wonders why she is learning to heal “from someone who has never healed?” (Webber 149)—these activities and techniques allow her to discern how to reconnect with her own self. Towards the end of the book, Webber reproduces the recordings of one of these sessions, with the voice of her teacher displayed in wide, red-framed word balloons (Webber 176). At the beginning, the teacher addresses Georgia's concerns and assures her that she can be of help, but Georgia feels distressed whenever she tries to practice her breathing and relaxing exercises. “I'm sorry,” she complains to the professional, “I can't—I mean I WANT to, it's just too much information... when you ask me to feel my feet or my breath, I get flooded—gravity, balance, pain in my back, tightness in my throat...” (Webber 177). Then, as if to subvert the visual darkness of Fig. 7, Webber introduces a succession of unframed images composed of different shapes, scribbles, textures, and undistinguishable human figures and faces drawn with thick splashes of red ink. As shown in the example provided in Fig. 8, no word balloons or letters are present in these pages, and the vivid shade of red employed throughout *Dumb* to signal Georgia's voice takes the reader's full attention. I read this striking artistic choice as a visualization of Georgia's act of embracing her own self as she is in the present moment—voiceless. Rather than only esteeming a speaking, abled self that can verbalize her thoughts and feelings, Georgia chooses instead to accept and explore her current disabled reality through her breathing exercises and her artistic work. And rather than insisting on healing from her injury as fast as possible, Georgia finally takes the time to sit still and look inward to meet her hurting, injured self.

In her study of crip time, Petra Kupperts (2014) observes that some moments of the lived experience of disability are not inherently arduous and traumatic, but instead “expand in time” and merge “into soft slow time, not hard fast time. They shift into crip time—the time of the *and*, rather than the *or* time of choosing and ordering” (31). I would argue that the images shown in Fig. 8 are embedded in this more favorable conception of crip time: the previous page presents no panels, grids, or any other traditional element found in the comics form. Since these key devices are crucial to move the narrative forward in time through the space of the page, to recall Chute's words (“Comics” 452), their absence suggests a desired stillness of time, which turns out to be favorable for Georgia on this occasion: she must learn how to breathe deeply, how to relax

her body, and how to live away from the frenetic rhythms and routines of work and productivity—and from the exhausting cycle of welfare applications as well. Therefore, Georgia learns to exist “out of time, out of productive, forward-leaning, exciting time” (Kuppers 29). Grounded in this kinder, slower time, she is capable of turning inwards to reconnect with her voice and to explore her disabled identity at a slower pace and in her own terms. “I hope you’ll share with us what you learn,” says the voice teacher to Georgia at the end of one of their sessions (Webber 180). And Webber does share her findings with her readers through a remarkable graphic work that incorporates distinct elements, colors, and graphic splits in order to recreate both her voicelessness and her voice—and all the frustrations and hopes that come with them.

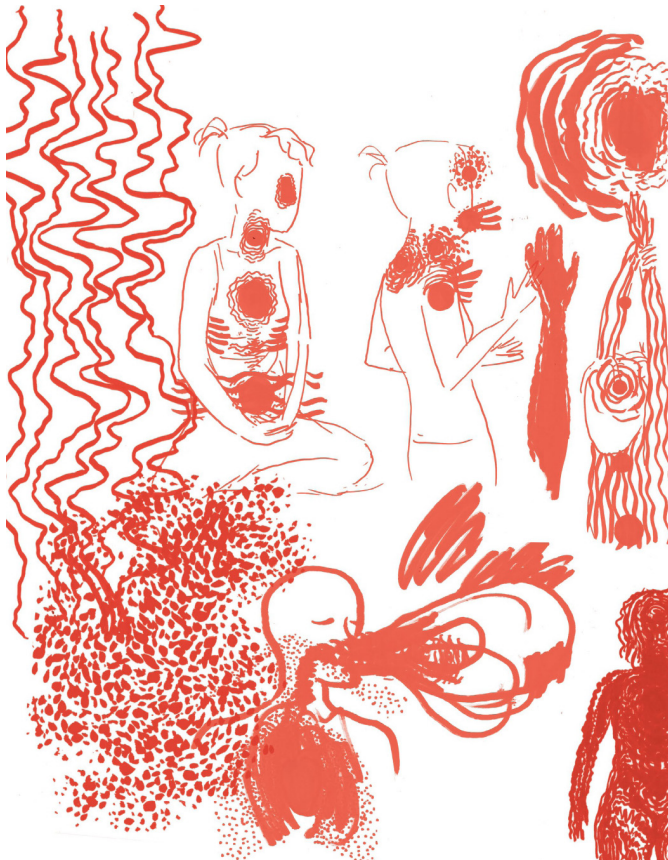


Fig. 8. Red shapes: Georgia's breathing exercises (Webber 181). From *Dumb: Living Without a Voice*, p. 181. By Georgia Webber, Fantagraphics, 2018.

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Ultimately, *Dumb* does not present an "overcoming" of disability, as Georgia does not recover nor completely heal from her vocal injury—and the reader is never told whether she can finally use her voice after her lessons. Instead, the narrative engages with her disabled existence by showing what Georgia learns through her fruitful negotiation of the loss of her voice and her turn towards artistic communication. By doing so, this graphic narrative reveals the most painful, traumatizing aspects of Georgia's voicelessness, while also engaging with her reconnection with herself and her exploration of her disabled identity through a return to the physicality of her body and her art.

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