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ARTICLE

Against Straight Lines

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Abstract

Many young people are taught to picture life as a straight line: succeed at school, choose a career, and move steadily towards adulthood. Drawing on queer time and crip time, this essay challenges the idea that there is one correct route or pace through life. It argues that pauses, detours, and dependence are not personal failures. They expose how narrowly society defines progress—and help us imagine more accessible futures.

Keywords: crip time; disability theory; queer time; social norms

There is a version of life you have already been handed. Do well at school, choose the right subjects, get the right grades, go to university, find a job, and settle down. Each stage leads neatly to the next, like stepping stones across a river. Follow them in the right order, at the right speed, and you are a success story. Congratulations.

But lives do not move like that. A person may not know what they want at 16. Illness, caring duties, poverty, discrimination, or simple uncertainty may interrupt the route. Such turns are treated as individual failures.

But what if the route itself is the problem? Who built that route, whom does it serve, and what becomes possible when we stop treating every detour as defeat? To answer that, we first need to see the line.

1. The line isn't neutral

The straight-line life looks natural because it is everywhere. You see it in school timetables, exam seasons, application deadlines, career ladders, marriage, and children. It's in all the annoying questions adults ask: What subjects are you taking? What are you doing after school? What do you want to be?

This line is more than a plan. It is a measuring stick. One person is praised for being "on track" while another is judged "behind." Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed describes how

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repeated social expectations create paths that feel natural.[1] A well-worn path is easier to follow, but ease does not make it neutral. It just shows who had the power to lay the paving stones in the first place.

Ahmed asks us to think about orientation: how we are directed towards some futures and away from others. A school careers leaflet might place university at the top and barely mention apprenticeships, care work, or returning to education later in life. Nobody has to announce that university seems to matter more. The page has already pointed the reader towards it.

2. The clock on the wall

The line tells us where to go. It also tells us when to arrive.

In 2005, American gender-studies scholar Jack Halberstam described the notion of "queer time": ways of living outside the schedule centred on the traditional nuclear family.[2] That schedule says: grow up, marry, have children, and repeat. Queer lives have often disrupted it, whether through non-heterosexual relationships, chosen family, or milestones reached in a different order. When society assumes everyone will grow into the same kind of adult life, people whose identities do not fit that future make the assumption visible.

You can see versions of this schedule everywhere. Know your future by 16; choose a career by 18; above all, be independent, keep moving, and do not be yourself if it makes others uncomfortable.

Queer time gives this pressure a name. Ahmed helps us see the line; Halberstam lets us hear the clock fixed to it. Together, they show that "forward" is not a neutral direction. It points towards some futures and away from others.

This does not mean that marriage, children, or a steady career are wrong. The problem begins when one possible life becomes the standard used to rank every other life. A timetable can guide us; it should not be a life sentence.

3. When bodies break the schedule

Disability bends the line. What happens when a body or mind cannot obey the clock?

In her book *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, disabled feminist scholar Alison Kafer explains the concept of "crip time."[3] Some disabled people have reclaimed the term "crip," once used as an insult, as a word of identity and resistance. Crip time can mean extra time, but it also challenges the demand that everybody study, work, move, or live independently at the same pace.

A school might allow 10 extra minutes in an exam yet keep a rigid school day that excludes a pupil with chronic fatigue. An assignment deadline extension does little if an inaccessible bus prevents a student from reaching class. The accommodation changes the stopwatch; crip time asks whether everyone should have to run the same race.

[1] Ahmed 2006.
[2] Halberstam 2005.
[3] Kafer 2013.

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Disability-studies scholar Ellen Samuels calls crip time "time travel."[4] Pain, fatigue, hospital appointments, and access barriers can pull someone out of the timetable their friends follow. As a disabled person myself, I often experience people confusing "needing support" with "falling behind" or "being childish." Their assumption says more about the clock they use than about the life I lead.

Crip time also challenges the ideal of total independence. Every life depends on other people: families, friends, teachers, doctors, and the plumber we phone when the toilet blocks. Everyone needs some kind of help; pretending otherwise is unrealistic. Many forms of support are so normalised that they disappear from view. Yet when support is more visible, as disabled people's often is, dependence is judged as a personal failure.

4. Detours are not failures

Once we can see the straight line, its shame begins to fade.

Pauses, repetitions, and unpredictable rhythms are not broken versions of ordinary life. They are ordinary life. A disabled student who takes longer to finish school is not less intelligent. A teenager who leaves education to care for a relative is not "behind." A person who needs help is not a child.

This matters beyond disabled and queer communities. People change courses, lose confidence, or discover their sexuality later than expected. Some repeat a year or return to education. Someone training as a veterinarian might realise they would rather become the postman dogs love to bark at. Sometimes continuing along a path that is not yours causes more harm than leaving it.

Detours aren't always liberating, of course. Some are painful; some are forced by prejudice, poverty, or inaccessible systems. But calling them failures blames the traveller for a roadblock somebody else built. The better question is not "Why couldn't they keep up?" but "What would let them take part?"

That change in question changes responsibility. If a pupil repeatedly misses lessons for medical appointments, the answer is not another lecture about organisation. Recorded lessons, flexible deadlines, or a different timetable may remove the clash. The pupil has not been repaired; the environment has become less disabling.

5. The future isn't a finish line

Rejecting the straight line does not mean rejecting the future. It means demanding a better one.

Cuban-American queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz argues that queerness reaches towards a world that does not yet exist.[5] But it could. That matters here because *Against Straight Lines* is not just my personal complaint about pressure. It is an invitation to imagine futures where people aren't judged by how quickly they reach milestones.

[4] Samuels 2017.
[5] Muñoz 2009.

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What would that look like? Schools recognising varied rhythms of learning, employers building flexible workplaces, and communities treating support as part of life rather than a source of shame. Friendship, creativity, and care belong on the map, too.

None of this can be solved by individual bravery alone. Routes widen when people act together: classmates challenge unfair rules, teachers question rigid deadlines, and employers plan access from the beginning. The humanities cannot magically remove every barrier. But they can help us recognise them, question them, and imagine alternatives. They can help us see that what feels like personal failure may be a social expectation masquerading as common sense.

That is practical work. Reading Ahmed can make us inspect the options on a careers leaflet. Reading Kafer can make a teacher ask whether an attendance rule confuses presence with learning. Reading Muñoz can move the discussion from helping one person fit an unchanged system to imagining a system designed for different bodies and minds. Ideas do not build the ramp, but they can show why the step was never inevitable.

I have often worried about falling behind. Learning that life is not a straight line has not removed the barriers I face, but it has changed the question. Instead of asking, "How can I stay on track?" I ask, "Who built the track—and what other routes can we build?"

Andrew James Pettigrew is an emerging deafblind researcher and artist based in central Scotland. He holds an MLitt in Creative Writing with Distinction, and his research bridges disability studies and literary practice. His work examines the socio-economic forces shaping identity, the potential of disability to challenge literary conventions, and the complexities of seemingly ordinary lives. He is a recipient of the University of Strathclyde's Maestro Award for Outstanding Academic Achievement and the inaugural Michelle Smith Scholarship Award. His creative writing has received recognition from the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award, the Pushkin Prizes, the Wells Young Poets Award, and the Black in White Anthology Prize. He has collaborated with the Poetry Society, Scottish Book Trust, and Pitlochry Festival Theatre, and serves on the board of Solar Bear, a Scottish Deaf theatre company. Outside academia, Andrew enjoys rambling conversations, dressing as a Jedi, and blogging at Wormhole Writings.

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