

**Russell West-Pavlov. *Temporalities*. London: Routledge, 2012, 211pp.**

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nothing but the tick of the clock and a world sucked dry;  
nothing—till the tide of time come back to the full  
and drown a man too sane, who climbed too high.

Judith Wright, 'The Moving Image', 1946 (2010)

*Temporalities* is a recent volume from Routledge's New Critical Idiom series, and is authored by the postcolonial literary scholar and critical theorist Russell West-Pavlov. Addressing neither singular authors nor singular texts, the New Critical Idiom series is somewhat peculiar. Its topics include literary genre (with a volume on genre itself), key concepts accruing critical resonance, as well as thematic categories. Former titles, for example, include *Gothic*, *Sexuality*, *Memory*, and *Interdisciplinarity*. While this spread may seem a bit haphazard, there are two key components that give the series its unity: literary theory and cultural studies informs its critical agenda, while each study includes a genealogical tracing of key concepts, genre distinction, and disciplinary terms of reference.

Another aspect of the book's peculiarity consists of the trajectory of West-Pavlov's own research and intellectual preoccupations, which have tended to concentrate more on the spatial registers of literature and philosophy. With titles such as *Spatial Representations and the Jacobean Stage* (2002), *Space in Theory: Kristeva, Foucault, Deleuze* (2009), and *Spaces of Fiction/Fiction of Spaces* (2010), the present book, concerned strictly with temporality, would suggest something of a divergence or perhaps departure. And yet considering the scope of his ongoing contribution to a postcolonial study of Australian literature and culture—some thirteen essays collected in his volume *Imaginary Antipodes: Essays on Contemporary Australian Literature and Culture* (2011)—narrative and history have been a contiguous, if not overlapping, preoccupation.

While West-Pavlov's *Temporalities* pretty well satisfies the brief 'of introductory books...which combine clarity of exposition with an adventurousness of perspective and a breadth of application' (Series Editor's Preface), it is by no means a pedagogically designed

summary of theoretical positions, or else a mere genealogy of conceptual application. Rather, the emphasis in this particular study is on a critical adventurousness that extends a specific argument.

As the title suggests, the disciplinary and cultural predominance of linear temporality (in the singular), in respect to a basic, methodologically attuned Enlightenment distinction between time and space, is set against an argument for manifold temporalities. And yet a critical insight and sensitivity to multiple temporalities would not merely view time as a manifold, multi-directional range of non-linear shifts and movements, but more vigorously set itself within an immanence in which ‘time is the very dynamic of existence, the pulsating drive of the unceasing transformation of being itself’ (3). A related theme running through the volume, in respect to ecological issues, concerns how this ‘being’ should not be restricted to the human, but includes other forms of animate and inanimate, organic and inorganic, life.

At once immanently physical and immanently imaginative, time is thus not merely a utility or instrument for the planning and carrying out of activities, but informs the very capacity to enter into fields of thought, social exchange, and material production—fields defined by a myriad of temporal trajectories encompassing manifold layers, pleats, or indeed intervals of matter. We could thus say, as an illustration, that although a camera cannot take a photo of time, the photo is only possible as an instance of time—the *temporary* interval in which time is practically immanent to shutter speed, as well as how in the process a sign peaks out from the temporal void (what Barthes called ‘the punctum’) and comes to disclose its capacity to signify through belated exposures or viewings of the photograph. Deleuzian notions of matter and transformation, immanence and becoming, are here obvious, though extended to a consideration of historical intersections between ecology and capital, environment and economy.

This Deleuzian approach works to articulate an alternative, less instrumentalist appreciation of temporality as a field of manifold trajectories in which people learn social skills to insinuate themselves in temporal flows of symbolic practices. As Deleuze, enamoured by a notion of ‘apprenticeship’ in which one learns to undergo an experience of the involuntariness of relationships between signs and time, famously said in his early work on Proust: ‘Signs are the object of a temporal apprenticeship, not of an abstract knowledge’ (1972, 4). By the same token, ‘this time in a nascent state...bears the highest signs, whose meaning is situated in a

primordial complication, a veritable eternity, an absolute original time' (ibid, 46). West-Pavlov's notion of time as 'the very dynamic of existence, the pulsating drive of the unceasing transformation of being itself', tends to flirt with what could be called a romantic vitalism that the French philosopher of folds, pleats, matter and mannerism, could never quite get out of the temper of his thought. And yet considering West-Pavlov's emphasis on the ethical and historical scope of temporal entanglement, the emphasis here would devolve on a sense of learning how time remains stubbornly excessive, never reducible to an objectifying analytic, to 'calibrating the progress of existence' (3).

In another register—or perhaps 'plane of immanence' (to borrow from a later Deleuze)—concerning critical temperament and a somewhat aberrant style, the pulsing stammer of immanent temporalities informs also the very composition of West-Pavlov's book, a register he foregrounds:

More radically, then, let us consider the book as a material process of transforming ideas, one whose history extends backwards through a myriad of intersecting trains of thought, converging, colliding, merging, moving apart again, now coming together in the three or four dimensions of a book (8).

And as he goes on to point out, the book's capacity to situate sense and significance will always remain split between the time in which it is written and the time in which it is read. Or more in keeping with the overall argument, the temporal folds of both its writing and reading have always to be performed through a temporal remainder, or layers of remainders, escaping the perceptual field (the time I stopped writing or reading to make a coffee; the time I stopped to answer the door; look out the window; adjust myself to the urgent time of another person's preoccupations).

Trained in literary and critical theory, West-Pavlov devotes some space to questions concerning language and discourse, history and narrative, gender and subjectivity, often mining literary texts for examples to illustrate his considerations. These considerations address works of literature and literary/cultural criticism in Australia, particularly concerning indigeneity. In this respect *Temporalities* draws on his essays from *Imaginary Antipodes*, which is to say that the argument for multiple and entangled temporalities challenges a more uniform writing of Australian history (former Prime Minister John Howard's preference for

what he liked to call ‘structured narratives’), and indeed taps into a contemporary Australian literature exercising more experimental and non-linear narrative compositions, or perhaps narrative dis-composition or discomposure.

To my mind, Sally Morgan’s autobiographical novel *My Place* (1987) encompasses a range of entangled temporalities, and could be adapted here to illustrate both West-Pavlov’s argument and the relevance of his argument for Australian literature. As Morgan traces the trajectory of relationships across three generations of her extended family, the narrative unfolds as a manifold range of crisscrossing stories that cannot be disentangled according to a linear assumption of the passage of time. What can be called the paratactic tempo of her narratives involve the same events being narrated by various members of her family, articulating not only different points of view but also varying temporal registers. Moreover, shifts between first-person and third work to situate characterisation as a movement between the subject matter of the story and a subject telling their story. This autobiographical layering of story and temporality has to be sure received much critical attention (in more ways than one). But the point here is that Morgan’s paratactic style works to enfold a sense of manifold temporalities immanently coursing through the very capacity to tell a story, a capacity that has always to emerge from an irredeemable split between story and narrative. Narratology calls this a productive split ‘anachrony’, involving an incessant movement of prolepsis and analepsis, or flash-forwards and flashbacks, the present itself becoming something like a remainder.

For West-Pavlov, this paratactic register has some bearing for a critique of allochronic historiographies whose linear assumptions of temporality close the gap between narrative and story. Thus, a critique of the Enlightenment’s stricture of progress understood as linear succession simultaneously involves a critique of universalising imperial historiographies that elide any remainder, any critical sense of the present as irremediably temporary:

Such elisions have culminated in many cases in the wholesale destruction of alternative encodings of existence and concomitant communal practices. For instance, the atemporal environmental ethos of the Australian indigenous nations prior to European conquest was declared to be that of a ‘timeless’ but ‘dying’ race and was almost completely eradicated by colonial violence and state management. However, like the Australian indigenous ethos of the land, alternative

temporalities remain latent and active under the threshold of linear time and its all but ubiquitous stranglehold (6; see also 170-74)

As residues of place (Morgan's *My Place*), this ethos of land does not so much lack a definitive identity, but comes to be affirmed as various temporal threads woven into, though not exhausted by, relationships of subjugation and resistance.

The brief of *Temporalities* is on the whole more philosophical, engaging in the main a continental philosophy of language and literature. Derrida's 'neographism' *différance*, for example, is enlisted to demonstrate that any fullness of meaning in the present can only be provisional, dependent on a temporal wake immanently crisscrossed by both past and future. In other words, the desire for full presence is structured by the impossibility of rendering temporality an instrument of order, which is to say that the present can only be an expression of the productivity of immanent time.

Almost at the centre of *Temporalities* is what I found to be an excellent chapter on "Economics", which moves in and out of production and consumption, capital accumulation and distribution, credit and finance capital. While this chapter somewhat stands out because of the more literary and phenomenological momentum of the book, it develops an insightful critique of how capitalist forms of production, exchange, and consumption are informed by an increasing instrumentalisation of time that is not only ecologically unsustainable, but has come to reify time to such an extent that it has all but vanished into the seeming placelessness and timelessness of global financial capital.

To my mind, a further chapter on the social implications of the relationship between technology and time would not have been superfluous. As I see my children using so-called smart phones and pads, I often feel that they are learning to live in a radically different experience of time than I did as a kid, if only because communication between one person and another has come to be so rapid. It strikes me that this increasing rapidity of communication also impinges on capacities for social exchange, a theme that Walter Benjamin had tried to tackle in his famous work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction essay. For not only has the packaging (above all, montage) of communication and access to information (an access unequally structured and distributed) become extremely rapid, but also the very *expectation* of this rapidity, an expectation implicating how time remains immanent to the possibility and

actuality of social exchange. Perhaps related to this is an increasing practice of oral and visual cultures, implicating variable temporalities, challenging a rather imperious assumption of allochronic difference between so called oral and literate cultures. This is a theme West-Pavlov addresses in the latter parts of his book.

The last two chapters focus on 'Postmodern Temporalities' and 'Postcolonial Temporalities' respectively. The 'post' of these terms suggests their ambivalence when contrasted to a predominating, European Enlightenment notion of time as linear and progressive. Designating both an after and its symptomatic impossibility, the temporal trajectories encompassed by both the postmodern and postcolonial foreground the limits of situating time as universally linear and singular. But where the former, the author argues, has been all too keen to celebrate a plurality that assumes a level playing field of equal access, the latter approaches this ambivalence to better disclose subjugating practices of cultural imperialism, social violence, and political chauvinism. And yet always careful to reflect on shortcomings, West-Pavlov reviews some of the critical literature on the scope of the 'post' in postcolonialism, observing that '*Post*-colonialism is clearly a misnomer in a world in which colonialism lives on in neo-colonialism, and imperialism continues under another flag' (160). But perhaps we could say that as a pleated range of immanent entanglements, temporalities informing the critical views of postcolonial critique could well be summed up by Dipesh Chakrabarty's (whose work West-Pavlov quotes) notion of the present's non-contemporaneity with itself (2008).

In his conclusion, West-Pavlov recognises a still predominating 'hegemonic model of absolute time' implicating an instrumental separation of time and space, subjugating 'colonized peoples and their territories, and...natural resources and their biotopes' (176). He argues for what amounts to a planetary commitment of the sciences and humanities to 'contribute to a different morality on the basis of shared but heterogeneous temporalities' (178). The notion of immanent, heterogeneous temporalities may well be difficult to situate in the midst of a still all-encompassing imperious logic and material practice informed by absolute linear time, but *Temporalities* certainly sets out the terms by which this difficulty can be critically addressed.

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