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Timing Canada: The Shifting Politics of Time in Canadian Literary Culture by Paul Huebener

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Critical Time Studies

***Timing Canada: The Shifting Politics of Time in Canadian Literary Culture* by PAUL HUEBENER**

McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015
\$37.95

Reviewed by **CHERYL LOUSLEY**

Paul Huebener's thoughtful and wide-ranging monograph on the social politics of time in Canadian literature and culture delineates a new critical approach, which he terms "critical time studies." Critical time studies engage with social functions and experiences of time, attending to how temporal frameworks contribute to forms of social inequality, national institutions, socialization and resistance, and meanings of self and identity. Spatial frameworks such as territory, borders, regions, landscapes, travel, and mapping are prominent in contemporary literary criticism generally and in environmental literary and cultural studies especially, given the strong interest in place, habitat, rural and urban landscapes, wilderness, and global and local scales. Temporal studies have been less prominent, although the temporal dimensions of environmental politics are evident in the anticipatory orientation of the categories of risk, futurity, apocalypse, and utopia, and feature in some of environmentalism's most enduring rhetorical devices, notably the Doomsday Clock of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, ticking close to midnight since 1947. Peter van Wyck's 2005 monograph *Signs of Danger* provided a meditation on the incomprehensibility of the temporal

scales involved in nuclear radiation. Rob Nixon's 2011 monograph *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* made temporality a key critical category for the analysis of environmental injustice, showing how the years-and decades-long pace of some ecological hazards and resource losses contributes to their social and political invisibility, discounted as forms of violence because "slow" and non-spectacular, while their extended duration has devastating effects on health, communities, and ecosystems.

In *Timing Canada*, Huebener provides a systematized array of temporal concepts and analytical tools that have broad applicability across the environmental humanities, even if their ecocritical relevance is not the explicit focus of the book. The book will especially delight scholars of Canadian literature for its survey of classic texts, such as Thomas Haliburton's *The Clockmaker* (of course!), E.J. Pratt's *Towards the Last Spike*, and Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (where the impetuous orphan is socialized into the discipline of clock time and future-oriented adult responsibility), as well as its sustained attention to contemporary authors, including Maria Campbell, Timothy Findley, Wayson Choy, Joy Kogawa, Margaret Atwood, M. NourbeSe Philip, Dionne Brand, Lawrence Hill, and Thomas King. This focus on a national literature might seem most unusual in a study of time, but Huebener conclusively demonstrates the pivotal role of temporal frameworks, from immigration waiting periods and prison sentences to working hours and environmental reviews, in shaping the

nation and the often intimate and socially differentiated ways that these forms of national time affect individual lives and experiences.

Synthesizing scholarship on time and temporality from the humanities and social sciences, Huebener introduces a set of six concepts to organize critical time studies. The first is “temporal justice” (18), which refers to inequities and injustices in how time functions socially, such as the feminist struggle for acknowledgement of women’s time spent in household labour and childcare, or the lengthy periods for settling Indigenous land claims compared to the speed in approving resource extraction projects. The second is “temporal framing” (19), which refers to the use of temporal concepts, such as day one, first, new, now, and long-term, and the authority to set and enforce a duration of time. The devastating revelation that the Métis had just three years to develop or lose their land, which Maria Campbell recounts at the opening of *Halfbreed*, is one of Huebener’s examples of how the ability to define a temporal starting point or end point reflects structural forms of power. Huebener further notes that “imagining that the counting of time begins at a certain moment, and not earlier, is often key to the evasion of temporal responsibility and the perpetuation of temporal injustice” (19). Placing an injustice in the past is another strategy, Huebener demonstrates, quoting Matthew Dorrell’s analysis of former Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s residential schools apology. Dorrell writes, “the construction of the statement of apology as a narrative of progress

confines the abuses of the residential schools system to the past while removing the contextual component of a larger and continuing colonial project” (qtd on 231).

The third concept is “temporal resistance” (19), which contests normative or unjust modes of time. Labour slow downs as well as the slow food movement are practical examples, but much of Huebener’s book is an overview of the many ways in which fictional texts enact forms of temporal resistance, in remembering occluded pasts, in re-ordering powerful narratives, and in claiming possible futures. The fourth concept is “time socialization stories” (20), which provide instruction in what Philip Zimbardo and John Boyd describe as “socially sanctioned attitudes towards time” (qtd on 20), such as measures of individual productivity and success. Zimbardo and Boyd give the example of “The Three Little Pigs” as a time socialization story that orients children towards the future; another time socialization story is that of civilizational development from primitive to advanced societies.

The fifth concept is “temporal discrimination” (21). Closely linked to the overarching concept of temporal justice, temporal discrimination is “the entrenched belief that one particular model of time is natural, desirable, and superior to other models of time, that one person’s time is inherently more legitimate than another person’s time, or that certain times (the present or the short-term future) are more deserving of agency, empowerment, and resource exploitation than other times” (21). In Lawrence Hill’s *The Book of Negroes*, Aminata ruminates on the temporal

dimensions of the power relationship of chattel slavery, asking, "Did he own me when I slept? When I dreamed" (qtd on 166), illustrating both the totalizing appropriation of her time and also her resistance to it as a person with her own experiences of time. She declares, "That, I decided, was what it meant to be a slave: your past didn't matter; in the present you were invisible and you had no claim on the future" (qtd on 166). Aminata's resistance to enslavement demonstrates Huebener's

final concept, that of "multitemporality," which he defines as the "coexistence of many temporal modes and experiences within a social collective" (22). Recognition of multitemporality is a useful strategy for identifying and remedying the various forms of temporal injustice that structure our collective lives.

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