
H-France Review Vol. 24 (August 2024), No. 55

Ashwiny O. Kistnareddy and Alice Roullière, eds., *Catching up with Time: Belatedness and Anachronies in Francophone Literature and Culture*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2022. 250 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$63.95.U.S. (pb). ISBN 9-78-1800793378; \$63.95.U.S. (eb). ISBN 9-78-1800793392.

Review by Antonia Wimbush, University of Melbourne.

The manipulation of time is a key trope in French historiography, particularly in the colonial and postcolonial periods. Ed Naylor reads France's civilizing mission, the ideology that purported to Westernize indigenous peoples as a justification of colonial expansion, as a *modernizing* mission. He argues that France sought to expand its empire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries "to counter the anachronistic connotations of colonialism by seeking to align the French imperial project with contemporary notions of progress and modernity." [1] If we fast forward to the twenty-first century, France's former colonies are still depicted as lagging behind, delayed, or positioned outside of history. Former French president Nicolas Sarkozy's infamous 2007 speech in Dakar, in which he exclaimed that "l'homme africain n'est pas assez entré dans l'histoire," is one such example of contemporary perceptions of Francophone societies being "behind the times." Given the prevalence of tropes of belatedness and delay in the French and Francophone imaginaries, it is thus surprising that these themes are mostly absent in scholarship on different temporalities in French and Francophone culture. Rather, critical attention has been paid either to a nostalgia for the past--such as in work by Kate Marsh and Jennifer L. Holme--[2] or to a utopian version of the future--according to Emmanuel Buzay and Jacqueline Dutton, among other scholars.[3]

This volume thus proposes an original and innovative approach to temporality in French and Francophone literature, philosophy, cinema, and theatre by examining delay and belatedness as a different way to interpret time, breaking from the conventional linear model of temporality which is prevalent in Western thought. It seeks to reconceptualize the notion of delay, reading it instead as an anachronism: "we remain committed to the idea that delays are not illustrated by the texts and films evoked here but, rather, that anachronism is embodied and problematized in form and language" (p. 3). Rather than considering delay and belatedness as negative tropes of backwardness and inferiority, the editors position these ideas as "constitutive of our human experience of space and time" (p. 3). There is artistic and philosophical merit, the editors suggest, in engaging in practices of "looking back" through writing and visual culture, to highlight "the plasticities of temporalities" (p. 5) and redefine what is meant by the past, present, and future.

The introductory essay, written by the volume editors Ashwiny O. Kistnareddy and Alice Rouillière, exposes the volume's theoretical foundations which are built on postmodern thought. Kistnareddy and Rouillière engage with the principles of postmodern time set out by thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and Giorgio Agamben. A particularly useful postmodern notion here is *Kairos*, “which refers to the appearance of Christ at the end of times” (p. 7). *Kairos* has been deployed by postmodern thinkers to allude to a future “that should have already happened, is always yet to come and late, having already been asserted as what needs to come” (p. 7). The editors then turn to analyze philosophical interpretations of anachronism, focusing on French (rather than Francophone) traditions. Beginning with a reflection on the etymology of the term “anachronism,” they show how philosophers such as Jacques Rancière, Georges Didi-Huberman, and Nicole Loraux conceive of delay as a signifier of modernity and a marker of positionality, agency, and power.

The first essay, “A temps, c’est-à-dire tard. L’hystérésis comme outil d’intelligibilité dialectique chez Sartre” by Chiara Collamati, continues this philosophical approach to belatedness, thereby laying the foundations with which to study this concept in contemporary artistic and cultural works. Collamati’s focus on delay and belatedness in Sartre’s work is original, given that most studies of time in his work analyze his vision of the future. There is merit in thinking through Sartre’s conceptualization of these temporal modes, according to Collamati, because it not only enables us to deconstruct the narration of postmodernity, but also to “repenser le potentiel de transformation politique propre aux formes de vies incarnées par les retardataires de l’histoire, dans les ruines du progrès capitaliste” (p. 19). Collamati approaches two texts by Sartre – *L’être et le néant* (1943) and *Critique de la raison dialectique tome I* (1960) and *Critique de la raison dialectique, tome II* (1985) – through the notion of hysteresis. This scientific term originates from Greek and refers to a time lag between the input and output in a system upon a change in direction. She traces the appearance of this term in Sartre’s writing, using it to understand how time is both fluid and mobile but also fixes the author in a very specific socio-historical period. In her contribution entitled “La lecture est le retard de l’écriture. Interprétations autour de Roger Laporte, de Jacques Derrida et d’Edmond Jabès”, Domenico Cambria moves beyond the realm of the writer to discuss how the temporal lag is also experienced by readers. Cambria argues that there are three stages of delay in the reading and writing process: the delay undergone by the author writing about an event or experience after it has occurred; the delay experienced by the reader who interprets the text after it has been written; and the delay encapsulated by the text itself, which is where these different temporalities meet. Cambria examines this triadic argument in French literary and philosophical works, namely Laporte’s biography *Une vie* (1986), Maurice Blanchot’s philosophical and autobiographical narrative *L’arrêt de mort* (1948), critiqued by Derrida in *Parages* (1976), and Jabès’s prose and poetry collection *Le Livre des questions* (1963). Cambria concludes by declaring that reflections on the processes of reading and writing allow us to understand “l’importance du lien entre l’autre et le soi”, and it is the book itself which cancels out these two figures “pour les repositionner dans un lieu jamais habité et toujours en retard” (p. 57).

The following two chapters examine the subversion of linear time in autobiographical works. Lili Owen Rowland’s contribution, “When the Self Arrives Late, or Didier Eribon’s Autotheoretical (Re)Turn”, argues that Didier Eribon’s *Retour à Reims* (2010) is innovative for the ways in which it transcends psychoanalytical and autofictional frameworks, instead proposing an autotheoretical approach to self-narrative. Owen Rowlands contends that Eribon’s use of autotheory, which combines queer theory by George Chauncy and Eve Sedgwick and Bourdieusian sociology with his own personal experience, enables him to understand the social world into which he arrives, a social order

that exists prior to him becoming a subject in the world. The recognition of this temporal gap occurs for Eribon through reading. For Eribon, this experience is transformative because it enables him to reimagine his identity with regards to his sexuality and social class. Alice Laumier's chapter, "*Mémoire de fille* d'Annie Ernaux: différer l'écriture, s'attarder sur l'évènement", continues the focus on the self's (belated) position in society in Ernaux's memoir, in which she remembers her traumatic rape which occurred in 1958. Laumier reads the trope of delay in Ernaux's memoir as less of an example of trauma theory and more as an indication of her societal delay. The sociological approach to literature is common in Ernaux's writing. Laumier thus reads *Mémoire de fille* as another example in which, through a complex temporal structure and alternating use of pronouns, literature deconstructs the notion that "appartenir à une classe sociale dominée c'est se sentir constamment en retard" (p. 87). Diane Otosaka then shifts the focus away from self-inspection and towards historical narrative in her chapter, "Dissonances, retards et temps non-chronologique dans *HHhH* de Laurent Binet." Otosaka examines how time works in Binet's historical narrative *HHhH*, a text which combines history and literature and centres around Operation Anthropoid, which aimed to kill Reinhard Heydrich in Prague in 1942. According to Otosaka, the text operates on two levels: it is a history of this military action and a narrative account of the writing of the text. It is the fusion of these narrative and metafictional strands that leads to anachronism at different levels in the text. Otosaka shows how the collective memory of this event is diffracted as it is remembered by the generation "after" in a process Marianne Hirsch has famously termed "postmemory." [4]

Visual culture and performance are addressed in the essays by Michael Grace and Sky Herrington respectively. Grace's chapter, entitled "'Se trouver en deux temps à la fois': Malabou and Marker's Plastic Images", examines the plasticity of time in Chris Marker's film *La Jetée* (1962) and Catherine Malabou's philosophical text *Que faire de notre cerveau?* (2004). Grace demonstrates how the still frames and spoken words in *La Jetée* exemplify Malabou's cognitive conception of time which is based on biological and neurological transformations within the brain. From this analysis, Grace extrapolates the value of analysing the temporal plasticity of film, given that it means "thinking the promise of a different history both for the image and the look it calls forth" (p. 146). The following chapter takes this study beyond mainland France, analyzing the works of Congolese playwright Sony Labou Tansi through postcolonial theory by Achille Mbembe and Frantz Fanon. Herrington thus calls attention to the ways in which Africa has been constructed by Western thought as an inherently 'delayed' and 'backwards' society. Her chapter, "'L'éternel recommencement': From Infernal Cycles to Subversive Spirals in Sony Labou Tansi's *Conscience de tracteur* (and beyond)", examines the motifs of repetition and resurrection and the use of pre-colonial Kongo cosmology to argue that *Conscience de tracteur* (1973) does not attempt to recover an imagined pre-colonial past but an adaptation of that past which corresponds to his own creative and political vision. The lags and delays between the time of writing and time of performance, and the lack of detail about the performances of this play, are further extratextual indicators of "a fulfilment that is still to come" (p. 152).

While the final two chapters in the volume address very different time periods and cultural contexts, they both deconstruct dichotomies between the occident and the orient and the past and the present. Sana Abdi's chapter, "Al-ghurbah ou l'exil occidental comme pratique moderne du soufisme chez Abdelwahab Meddeb", examines the poetry of Tunisian writer Abdelwahab Meddeb through what she terms 'le détour médiéval'. She borrows concepts from Sufism, a religious practice within the religion of Islam, to show how time and space are subverted in Meddeb's poetry. Rebecca Courtier continues this deconstruction of temporal boundaries by reading *La Fille du comte de Pontieu*, an early nouvelle

from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, alongside Frantz Fanon's *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) through Homi Bhabha's concepts of third space, in-betweenness, and mimicry. The anachronistic reading she carries out in "Reading 'In-between' the Lines of *La Fille du comte de Pontieu* and *Peau noire, masques blancs*" is highly productive and illuminating, given the "shared considerations of cultural identity and figures of difference: what it means to be 'French' across the ages" (p. 192).

There are many strengths to this volume, notably the innovative ways in which each author reexamines the tropes of delay and belatedness in French and Francophone culture, moving away from their negative connotations to depict their transformative potential in rethinking time. Furthermore, the volume has included analyses of a variety of media and genres, such as life writing, poetry, fiction, cinema, and theatre. The collection moves the focus beyond metropolitan France to examine Congolese theatre and Tunisian poetry, although it would have been productive to address yet further areas of the French-speaking world to avoid centering cultural production from France. The volume could have followed a clearer structure, perhaps by organizing the chapters into sections to enable common threads and themes to emerge more organically. It is pleasing, though, to see many contributions (five out of the nine articles) written in French. Moreover, all the contributors are early-career researchers, and the volume thus gives them an excellent platform for sharing their innovative and interdisciplinary work. Overall, this is a fruitful project which rethinks linear notions of time in Francophone literature and culture in exciting and unique ways.

List of Essays

Alice Rouillière and Ashwiny O. Kistnareddy, "Introduction: Catching up with Time"

Chiara Collamati, "A temps, c'est-à-dire tard. L'hystéresis comme outil d'intelligibilité dialectique chez Sartre"

Domenico Cambria, "La lecture est le retard de l'écriture. Interprétations autour de Roger Laporte, de Jacques Derrida et d'Edmond Jabès"

Lili Owen Rowlands, "When the Self Arrives Late, or Didier Eribon's Autotheoretical (Re)Turn"

Alice Laumier, "*Mémoire de fille* d'Annie Ernaux: différer l'écriture, s'attarder sur l'évènement"

Diane Otosaka, "Dissonances, retards et temps non-chronologique dans *HHhH* de Laurent Binet"

Michael Grace, "'Se trouver en deux temps à la fois': Malabou and Marker's Plastic Images"

Sky Herington, "'L'éternel recommencement': From Infernal Cycles to Subversive Spirals in Sony Labou Tansi's *Conscience de tracteur* (and beyond)"

Sana Abdi, "Al-ghurbah ou l'exil occidental comme pratique moderne du soufisme chez Abdelwahab Meddeb"

Rebecca Courtier, “Reading ‘In-between’ the Lines of *La Fille du comte de Pontieu* and *Peau noire, masques blancs*”

NOTES

[1] Ed Naylor, “Introduction,” in Ed Naylor (ed.), *France’s Modernising Mission: Citizenship, Welfare and the Ends of Empire* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. xvii-xli (p. xviii).

[2] Kate Marsh, *Narratives of the French Empire: Fiction, Nostalgia, and Imperial Rivalries* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013); Jennifer L. Holme, “Consuming Nostalgia in *Le Fabuleux Destin d’Amélie Poulain*,” *The French Review* 89.1 (2015): 69-81.

[3] Emmanuel Buzay, *Contemporary French and Francophone Futuristic Novels: The Longing to be Written and its Refusal* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023); Jacqueline Dutton, “Transnational Utopianism in French Futuristic Fiction,” in *Transnational French Studies*, ed. by Charles Forsdick and Claire Launchbury (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2023), pp. 311-334.

[4] Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 5.

Antonia Wimbush
University of Melbourne
Antonia.wimbush@unimelb.edu.au

Copyright © 2024 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172