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The New American Temporality Studies: Narrative and National Times in the Nineteenth Century

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THE NEW
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Holly Jackson

Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America by Dana Luciano. New York: New York University Press, 2007. pp. 368. \$75.00 cloth; \$25.00 paper.

Archives of American Time: Literature and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century by Lloyd Pratt. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. pp. 248, 6 illust. \$55.00 cloth.

In recent years, American literary studies has reevaluated the cultural politics of time in nineteenth-century texts. A spate of critical works have called for renewed attention to the role of print culture, long held to be instrumental to the consolidation of American identity through the cultivation of a shared national time characterized by both linear progress and synchronicity, in both disrupting and abetting the formation of national consciousness. A landmark intersection of this temporal turn and affect studies, Dana Luciano's *Arranging Grief*, winner of the Modern Language Association Prize for a First Book, mines a prodigious archive to analyze the development in the nineteenth century of an "affective chronometry: the deployment of the feeling body as the index of a temporality apart from the linear paradigm of 'progress'"; that is, uses of the body as a "timepiece" (1). She argues that emotional embodiment provided a slower, nonlinear time in contrast to national time: "As a newly rational and predominantly linear understanding of time came to dominate the West, the time of feeling, deliberately aligned with the authority of the spiritual and natural worlds, was embraced as a mode of compensation for, and, to some extent, of resistance to, the perceived mechanization of society" (6).

Central to this study is Luciano's theorization of *chronobiopolitics*,

“the sexual arrangement of the time of life” (9). Historicizing the new embrace of grief in the nineteenth century, as opposed to the previous perception of excessive mourning as disobedience to divine will, she makes the surprising claim that grief was central to the deployment of sexuality. Examining the chronobiopolitics of domesticity, especially the mother-child relationship that reproduces subjects and connects the past to the future, she identifies a “reproductive/generational orientation at the heart of” a “sexual politics of time in the nineteenth century” (62). Taking “the dreamtime of the maternal-filial connection” as an example, she indicates how alternate times can ultimately reinforce rather than challenge progressive national time (126). She writes, “[T]he mother’s corporealized time takes form . . . *against* the linear time of history, naturalizing the economy from which it projects itself as a refuge” (127).

Transporting readers into nineteenth-century grief culture, the first chapter analyzes consolation literature such as mourner’s handbooks and printed sermons, which performed, according to Luciano, “the dual task of soliciting the feelings ‘naturally’ associated with loss and of shaping and regulating their social productivity” (32). Despite these attempts to control the disruptive potential of mourning, Luciano’s reading of the poem “The Little Shroud” (1822) by Letitia

Landon indicates that departures from productive time may not be so easily allayed. With characteristic expressivity, she observes, the story’s “dilation on the painful pleasure of longing intimates that the sticky textures of attachment might tug against authoritative arrangements of time, pointing toward the buried traces of resistance that consolation worked to cover over” (63).

Examining the bridge between personal mourning and national memorialization, Luciano describes the pedagogical task of monuments, “not to *teach* history but to instruct people how to *feel* about it . . . [T]he monument imposes closure on historical events by declaring for all time what they mean” (174). Expertly close reading texts ranging from Herman Melville’s novella “Benito Cereno” (1855) to Horst Hoheisel’s 1995 proposal to blow up Brandenburg Gate in Berlin to memorialize the Holocaust, Luciano theorizes countermonumentalism: both “the countermonumental *vision*—the assurance that past, present, and future are linked not in a single linear narrative but in an ever-evolving array—and the countermonumental *impulse*—the demand for historical memory to work through this linkage without relying on amnesia or subscribing to a redemptionist teleology” (171). In the address we know as “What to the Slave Is the 4th of July” (1852), for example, Frederick Douglass develops

a countermonumental perspective on the legacy of the American Revolution by revising tropes of mourning, fragmenting the experience of “affective simultaneity” that works like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) seek to instill in readers. The countermonumental perspective disallows neat narrative closure that would contain the meaning of history, delivering “a distinct shock through the recognition of slavery itself as an ongoing *interruption* to the mutually imbricated timelines of family and nation, a shock that entailed, in effect, the deliberate ruination of sacred forms of American nationality” (183).

A chapter on Abraham Lincoln, who Luciano nominates “the nation’s Mourner-in-Chief,” discusses the social significance of the sixteenth president’s well-known melancholy as evinced in texts from the Gettysburg Address to Elizabeth Keckley’s *Behind the Scenes; or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (1868). Reimagining the temporal simultaneity of national imagining, Luciano focuses here on an “affective nationality” reliant on “national ‘feeling-in-common,’” illustrating how shared mourning unites people in relation to national principles held to be timeless (218). To his eulogists, Lincoln’s exceptional capacity for mournfulness “appeared as a form of sentimental leadership, making him, in effect, a role model for a feeling nation” (229). This chapter

also considers how African American grief following the president’s assassination “provided an avenue for African Americans to participate actively in the nation” (240), serving as “a sign of national membership” (243).

Among this book’s many important contributions is a vision of grief as the basis of a politics of resistance that does not defer to the future-oriented logic of generational reproduction. Luciano argues, for example, that Keckley’s critique of slavery diverges from the conventional maternal rhetoric that would turn her son into an emblem of the future. Granting priority to the inviolability of the body over that of the family, Keckley focuses not on the “linear/cyclical progress of the generational nation but the charged and uncertain time of the ‘now’” (257). Similarly, in Douglass’s address and Frances Harper’s poem “The Slave Auction” (1854), Luciano sees “a countermonumental reconfiguration of the status of the present tense, one effected by a deliberate wresting-free of that tense from its naturalized place in the order of things,” calling us to recognize the radical potential of this instant (194).

* * *

In *Archives of American Time*, Lloyd Pratt continues the work of rethinking the relationship between

the temporalities recorded and produced by early-nineteenth-century American literature and the inception of social formations like race and nation. Challenging the notion that the print revolution enabled the formation of national consciousness by producing an experience of shared time, Pratt emphasizes instead “the often ignored disaggregating potential of the period’s literature and its peculiar account of time,” which was “deeply inhospitable to the consolidation of national and racial identity” (3). Instead of national synchronization in this period, this study reveals a proliferation of temporalities and argues that “the expansion of print and transportation technologies magnified this pluralization” (3). In spite of its cultural nationalist content aimed at describing a coalescing American experience, Pratt argues, early and antebellum U.S. literature formally belies social synchronicity: “[H]owever much this period’s writing may seem to anticipate a uniform national destiny emerging from the narrowing down of future possibility that the American ideology of progress envisions, the very same literature articulates at the level of form a modernity defined by not one but several distinct temporal dispositions” (5).

This work’s most significant methodological contribution is its attempt to correct what Pratt sees

as an inattention to genre in nineteenth-century American literary studies, “one of this field’s few remaining stabilizing touchstones” (13). Following Wai-Chee Dimock, he views genres as “dissolving and constantly reassembling conjunctures of literary forms drawn from the *longue durée* of literary history” (14). Literary texts thereby reintroduce the temporalities encoded in genres from various historical and geographic contexts. Thus, rather than simply representing the temporalities of the historical moment of its production, “this literature also deepens the period’s temporal repertoire; it supplements the orders of time that emerged from industrial manufacture, slave economies, and the like with the anachronistic temporalities that any literary genre (re)introduces into the present” (5). Pratt’s attention to the multiple times inherent in literary iteration “reveals the extent to which nineteenth-century American literature, notwithstanding the desire of many writers and editors to create a national literature, is more properly thought of as a literature of modernity” (15).

Chapter 1 considers the portrait of King George in Washington Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle” that morphs incompletely into a representation of George Washington as a figure for the modern conjuncture of multiple nonsynchronous temporalities (47). In Pratt’s reading,

Irving's ekphrastic description suggests "that what typifies this modernity is not a displacement of the past or the antiquation of former modes of inhabiting time. In this modernity, new temporal modes are coeval with old ones; long-past and present orders of time work together to undo the social ordering of the present" (27). To the extent that it always involves the overlay of multiple times, Pratt concludes, "[L]iterature is no friend of the nation." Indeed, for Irving, "[L]iterature sticks us to our place. In a reversal of fortunes, the figure of print turns out to be a force for deep locality" (53).

In chapter 2, Pratt argues that the cultural nationalism of the American historical romance is similarly undercut by its form. In particular, he claims that dialect writing challenges the "before-and-after" narratives of American modernization that these romances seek to construct. Taking the dialect-speaking character Scipio in *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) as a central example, he writes,

Scipio's "dialect" implies a language that had to have come before it. This prior language is not vernacular "speech," as one might logically suppose; it is instead the standard of written language that this dialect writing presupposes as its point

of departure. . . . Although those prior marks are not graphically apparent, they are no less present in the moment of reading than the ones we do see. In this sense, Scipio's "dialect" entails a past and present that are different and so formally articulates the linear temporality being concealed at the level of statement. (94)

For Pratt, dialect writing divides one moment into two times, a past and present, because standard English, though unrepresented, is understood as *prior* to nonstandard declensions: "Dialect writing requires its reader to perceive both its past and its present in the single moment of reading. This flickering quality is dialect writing at work" (97). Although this account of the reader's mental flickering is a fascinating and useful way to theorize the mechanism of dialect writing, it is not entirely clear why Scipio's speech should be understood as *later* than standard English, occurring after it in time rather than different from it in any number of other ways. Even if we must contain this flickering within a linear framework, we might just as easily imagine Scipio's dialect to precede standard expression. The reader *first* encounters the defamiliarizing marks and *then* fills in the unrepresented norm. Ultimately, Pratt's

reading of this scene illustrates the inadequacy of our standard paradigm of progressive linearity but also the difficulty of describing temporal difference outside of it.

Chapter 3 considers southwestern humor writing from the 1830s to the early 1860s, shedding light on how regionalism “uncouples storytelling from linear progress,” deconstructing the notion that technologies of travel or narrative necessarily produce progressive linear time (149). Considering the scholarly attention that has been devoted to regionalism at the turn of the twentieth century, Pratt’s focus on this earlier moment in the genre’s American development is a refreshing contribution to the field. He argues that “in both of its major moments, nineteenth-century literary regionalism describes a nation characterized by an internal division of time” (129). Pratt concludes that the “shifty” and “opaque” local characters who must confront nationalizing forces in this literature are somewhat but not completely resistant to these encroachments, representing temporal overdetermination and the “super-addition” of modernity’s multiple times.

In the final chapter, Pratt argues that African American life writing speaks not to the deprivation of time, as classic readings of the slave narrative have suggested, but rather the experience of being

in time in more than one way. Frederick Douglass’s insistence on a narrative of progress in his autobiographies, for example, is interrupted by his representations of the laboring time of slavery: “Douglass’s life narratives work hard to frame his experience as a chronicle of progress, but at this particular juncture, Douglass’s sensitivity to slavery’s insidiousness leads him to acknowledge that . . . the repetitive, unbroken, and unremitting labor Douglass endures at Covey’s produces a particular, and particularly brutal, nonprogressive experience of time” (164). Pratt suggests that African American authors may have sought to silence the diversity of time: “To publicly own an experience of temporal variety is to undermine one’s claim to a coherent identity. In this sense, the life narrative’s tendency to downplay its temporal variety in its addresses to the reader bespeaks a certain sensitivity to the politics of time” (168). This reading leads me to wonder whether we might view progressive linear time as racially normative (and normalizing), much in the way that queer theory has exposed the resexual forms on which national temporality depends as heteronormative.

Similarly intriguing is Pratt’s treatment of *spirit time* in Jarena Lee’s 1836 autobiography *The Life and Experience of Jarena Lee*, which he defines as “an experience of

communion that is best described as time outside of time” (168). When Lee’s employer replaces her Bible with a novel, which Lee will not read, “[h]er account of refusing novel reading stages an explicit contrast between the worldly time of progress symbolized by the novel and the experience of time outside of time afforded by Bible reading. . . . According to Lee, the most popular artifact of Western print capitalism, the Bible, articulates a time of the spirit hostile to earthly imagined communities and their narrative instantiation” (171). This fruitful reminder that premodern religious temporalities were widely disseminated by the print revolution often credited with spreading a homogeneous national time indicates how reading might work against the cultivation of earthly communities: “[T]he moment of communion with the divine, of time outside of time, actually severs the spiritual autobiographer’s connection to other humans. Simultaneity with others is periodically impossible; so too are secular community and social identity” (176).

In an impassioned epilogue, Pratt addresses the shift in the humanities in favor of global or transatlantic studies, the “undertheorized embrace” of which, he argues, “can mask the spread of nineteenth-century America’s manifest destinarian impulses into the present”

(23). While the spatial turn proposes a break with the nationalism of previous critical models, “it might turn out that shifting the scale and axis of the humanities effectively restabilizes the identitarian logic of nationalism” (187). Pratt powerfully defends the attempts of post-colonial studies to deconstruct the “discourses of purity” mobilized by dominant groups and provocatively questions the capacity of the spatial turn to effect comparable destabilizations (196).

But to grant that temporal variegation inhibits nationalization, must we concede the Andersonian chestnut that nationalism requires homogeneous empty time? Luciano’s study outlines the ways in which deployments of alternate times can ultimately aid the ascendancy of progressive national temporality despite their seeming capacity to unsettle it. Does the temporal variety that Pratt identifies constitute an ongoing oppositional element that disrupts the realization of totalizing social formations, or does it suggest that temporal simultaneity is not actually necessary for the inception of durable and politically effectual group consciousness? What other ideological or experiential forces can engender communities or construct credible social aggregates, irrespective of uneven experiences of time? Initiating these questions and many more, *Archives of American Time* is

a stimulating study of the role of American literature in describing, analyzing, and multiplying modernity's heterochronicity, resisting rather than reinforcing fantasies of coherent social identity. It compels us to consider what we might mean by "American literature" if

we refuse to accept that the project of national imagining has been successfully accomplished.

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