

An anthropology of temporality:

In search of lost time, or why time should never get lost.

Review of *Ethnographies of Youth and Temporality: Time Objectified (Global South)*. Eds. By Dalsgaard, A., Frederiksen, M.D., Højlund, S., Meinert, L. Temple University Press. 2014. 206 pages.

This collection of ethnographic essays outlines the anthropological possibilities of engaging time as an object of study. In proposing a reconsideration of time beyond a commonly assumed abstract linear progression, the contributors to this volume explore the intricacies arising from different social, malleable, and experiential considerations of temporality. Youth in particular, as a transitional period from childhood to adulthood, distils a spectrum of experiences of time, which the ethnographers are describing and documenting around the world. “Ethnographies of Youth and Temporality: Time Objectified” sets out to map the ways time is reflectively and emotionally experienced through the perspective of youth, and in doing so, offers both an array of diverse ethnographic situations with a synthetic overview of their confluences.

In introducing their collection of essays, two of the editors, Martin Frederiksen and Anne Dalsgaard, explain the necessity of this volume: anthropological theorizing has until recently neglected the systematic and cross-culturally comparative analysis of time. Their approach to an anthropological objectification of time is multi-faceted, and includes an examination of how time and temporality frames social life, how actors reflect on discordant temporalities, and the different ways they cope with their (dis)ability to act on time – indeed, indeterminacy and uncertainty are core themes that permeate the ethnographic vignettes. ‘Boredom, waiting, inactivity, subjectivity and inertia’ they argue, are central to an anthropological consideration of

time, since during these moments the regularity of time flows is fragmented (p.4). The authors wonder then, what are the experiences of a ‘temporal impasse’, and what are the strategies youth employ to cope with these? They suggest that these temporal phases, previously thought as empty, are perhaps hosting a potpourri of phenomenological experiences that anthropology should be engaging with. Boredom and routine are therefore considered as sites of ‘meaning and agency’, as opportunities of imagination and, in certain cases, overwhelming existential struggle. They invite us to enrich the anthropological toolbox to engage with times of inactivity and passivity, and no less with ‘the easiness and casualness’ of the everyday.

The subsequent chapters delve into ethnographic examples to elaborate field-based apprehensions of an anthropological theorizing of time. From comparatively looking at these chapters, the editors have synthetically identified three core themes of the volume. Firstly, ‘*the time of times*’ referring to conceptions and qualities of time shaped by the ideological, religious or other principles nested in specific historical contexts. ‘*Being outside of time*’ captures the situations where individual or particular group experiences of time are in discordance with societal time or the temporalities of dominant ideologies. Finally, ‘*time work as relational*’ assembles the instances where individuals are actively creating temporalities and managing time through social and intersubjective negotiations. The ethnographic contributions provide a rich cross-cultural framework within which time/temporality is implicitly or explicitly engaged with, thought, and performed by actors.

Jennifer Johnson-Hanks comparatively looks at experiences of persistent temporariness among educated young women in Yaoundé, Cameroon and San Francisco, US. She describes the normalization of waiting in a state of suspended action, of an elongated interstitial pause, and asks how people make meaning during major life-course transitions such as finishing school or changing jobs (Chapter 1). **Stephen Jensen** addresses broken time, through the Filipino concept of *buryong*, which can be translated as boredom, or form of insanity, or even as waiting for nothing. His work with young men at Bagong Silang is geared towards understanding how young people cope with this, and he suggests that notions of brotherhood and employment become active modes of coping with *buryong* (Chapter 2). The question of ‘dead time’ interests **Stine Kroijer** when she deals with qualities of time among young left-radical activists in Copenhagen, Denmark. Through the experiences of a 24-year-old young activist, Kroijer

unravels how within a cultural environment that looks at young people as politically immature, dead time does not simply refer to an empty immediate presentism but is inherently linked to bleak perspectives of radical change in the future, a contemporary type of political pessimism (Chapter 3). **Martin Demant Frederiksen** describes states of boredom and depression in Batumi, Georgia, as these are experienced by under/unemployed youth who struggle with having nothing to do. In a city with large reconstruction projects of revitalization as a major tourism center, Frederiksen chronicles the heterochronic atmosphere settling between multiple and contradicting temporalities (Chapter 4). **Anne Line Dalsgard**'s ethnographic contribution to the volume picks up in the similar topic of contemporary experiences of empty time, but through insecurity linked to a perceived or real lack of opportunities. In her fieldwork at the outskirts of a Recife neighborhood in Brazil she focuses on the willful projections of three young Brazilians, who try to conceive a future and distance themselves from an immediate current situation and a social environment that devours hopes and dreams (Chapter 5). **Karen Valentin** considers how interrelated temporalities can facilitate or constrain geographic mobility and shift our ideas of futurity and what is possible/impossible. Her fieldwork addresses temporality among Nepalese students who migrate to Denmark and explores how education becomes one more way of thinking about time as a linear-forward aspect of modernization (Chapter 6). **Razvan Nicolescu**'s account of boredom among Romanian teenagers, invites us to rethink the connotations and understanding of boredom. He describes how teenagers actively transform temporalities of boredom into intersubjective spaces using communication media, and how boredom is experienced in relation to the potentiality of excitement offered by their environment (Chapter 7). At last but not least, **Lotte Meinert** and **Nana Schneidermann** explore naming practices among young male artists in northern Uganda as temporal and relational work. Self-naming among young artists is described as an active work on the future as it calls different potentialities into being, and the ethnographers detail the ways time work is involved in the process of creation of young musician's names (Chapter 8). The afterword by **Michael Flaherty** concludes the edited volume by proposing an *analytical fiction* within which this anthropological theorizing of time can be considered. Flaherty considers time and temporal experience in the dialectical relationship of structure and agency. He argues time is a structural notion since it is everywhere, and it is a social institution. But it is also a concept of agency since the temporal experience within socio-historical contexts is constantly modified and negotiated, an enterprise he qualifies

as ‘time work,’ or ‘temporal agency.’ He suggests that these two facets of time theorizing are not contradicting but instead are two faces of the same coin, if considered as forms of social interaction. Moving along he further develops this idea in considering enduring patterns of interaction within structure, and self-selected forms of interaction within agency.

Among the many qualities of this volume, I will underline two that I consider to be relevant in any work attempting to anthropologize time, or simply, in any anthropological work. Firstly, the authors manage to provide both a synthetic theorizing on time, and a rich empirical evidence through concrete ethnographic accounts. As such they succeed in conveying how time and temporality are variable but always present. The experience, perception, organization and negotiation of time is immanently embedded within particular socio-cultural contexts, which leaves a creative space in all types of anthropological work to engage with time as an ever-present entity, much like language. So, whether we’re focusing on immigration, or work, or education, or infrastructure, or health etc., time, its social organization and individual permutations are always present, and the authors invite us to acknowledge this constant regardless our thematic or area specializations. Secondly, in focusing on time as a mode of being and as an experiential technique of the self, the authors point out to a relative blind spot in contemporary anthropology. Anthropologists often consider and describe what people do, how they act and react. But what space does that leave in anthropological workings for considering inactivity, passivity, waiting, boredom, emptiness that so frequently but silently inhabit our lives? Focusing on these processual moments, instead of reducing them into empty spaces separating us from the preconfigured telos of our anthropological research, is not only critical for contemporary anthropology, but could possible add more nuances to the palette of our anthropological spectrum. In that sense, this collected volume on the object of time in anthropology, while providing multiple accounts situating the experiences of temporality among youth, inevitably also invites us to consider temporality beyond youth. In such an endeavor this volume of collected essays can certainly be pivotal, with concise and clear ideas on time objectification in anthropological theory and practice, in other words, an invaluable reference for anthropologists interested in, of course time and youth, but also researchers within psychological anthropology, the anthropology of ethics and morality, or any ethnographic endeavor.

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