In the Meantime

Temporality and Cultural Politics

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For Jeremy Packer and our two metronomes,
ZYLA SHANTHI *and* DAHLIA RAI

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Acknowledgments

I have a running joke (mostly with myself) that *In the Meantime* is the first book in the slow book movement series. It took a long time to write. In the doldrums of writing my mind would often wander to the moment I could write the acknowledgments. Finally getting to write these pages has left me feeling as if I am accepting an Academy Award. I'm going to go with that feeling.

Tucked between the pages of this book is an invisible itinerary made up of a series of places and journeying times. The people encountered along the way, and there are a lot of them, are the reason the book is what it is today. The idea for this book began when I was a PhD student in the Joint Program in Communication and Culture at York University and Ryerson University in Toronto. Jody Berland was an absolutely incredible advisor. There's nothing like working with someone whose work inspires you. She taught me where to look, how to look, and, most important, how to talk to people along the way. I want to thank a host of mentors, professors, and peers at York University: Stephen Bailey, Shannon Bell, Roberta Buiani, Barbara Crow, Lauren Cruikshank, Kevin Dowler, Fred Fletcher, Bob Hanke, Andrew Herman, Nathan Holmes, Guy Letts, Ravindra Mohabeer, Evren Oszelcuk, Scott Preston, Beth Seaton, Ed Slopek, Matthew Tegelberg. I want to especially thank Ganaele Langlois, Tanner Mirrlees, and Scott Uzelman for their intellectual camaraderie and friendship. And thank you to the following cast of genius characters connected to ComCult, purveyors of side splitting laughter, who will always be my Toronto family and who especially grounded me during these years by teaching me that there is more to life than "discourse or dat course": Mike Bickerton, Sara Chan,

Stephen Gilbert, Erin MacKeen, Sara Martel, Rebecca Morier, Nick Taylor, and Mark Kenneth Woods.

But this book truly came into being after I moved to the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, in 2006. The Department of Communication Studies, my academic home, has been the most intellectually supportive place I could do my thinking and teaching. I have immense gratitude for my colleagues who have fostered an environment of creative and rigorous inquiry. Lawrence Grossberg has been an incredible mentor and friend. His engagement in my research and my well-being in general is unparalleled for a colleague. Ken Hillis has been a sympathetic Canadian co-conspirator, cherished co-instructor of technology studies, and esteemed mentor. I also want to especially thank Dennis Mumby for being a fabulous department chair for the entire period leading up to tenure and the publication of this book. A special thank you to Carole Blair and Della Pollock for their constant and unwavering guidance for all things both big and small. Thank you to my at one time junior cohort: Renee Alexander Craft, Rich Cante, Sarah Dempsey, Michael Palm, Tony Perucci, Ed Rankus, and Kumi Silva. I must single out Christian Lundberg who started at UNC in Bingham Hall at the same time as me. I have valued our exchange tremendously, even when the conversation shifts to psychoanalysis. Thank you to Francesca Talenti and Gregory Flaxman for their friendship and warmth as soon as I arrived in North Carolina. At UNC at large I thank: Banu Gokariksel, Jordynn Jack, Mark Katz, Dick Langston, Cary Levine, John McGowan, Mai Nguyen, John Pickles, Inga Pollmann, Alvaro Reyes.

I have received financial support from UNC by way of the Spray-Randleigh fellowship and the Junior Faculty Development fund. This book was also supported by a semester-long fellowship from the UNC Institute for the Arts and Humanities. I want to especially thank the Hyde Family for the fellowship but also Julia Wood who ran the lively weekly meetings and Tim Marr (from American Studies) for his incredibly insightful feedback.

My graduate students helped shape some of the most important ideas in this book. I mean it when I say that they are the best part of my academic life — one that cannot be traded for anything. A tremendous thank you to Grant Bollmer, my very first PhD advisee, who provided RA work for this book and sustained a five-year conversation with me over its contents. What a treat to work and think alongside him for all of this time. Thank you to Nathan Taylor for his care with all of the images in this book and for managing to keep a straight face during my Luddite bouts. My other PhD

advisees during the time of writing this book have all pushed my thinking and challenged me in innumerable ways. I leave every conversation with each of these individuals with more than I came with: Adam Rottinghaus, Armond Towns, and Grover Wehman. A number of unforgettable students enrolled in the three different iterations of my "Politics of Time and Space" grad seminar over the past six years as I was writing. A special thank you to (in order of appearance): Josh Smicker, David Terry, Sindhu Zagoren, Brett Lyszack, Dan Sutko, Kin Tsu Chung, Carey Hardin, Bryanne Young, Jade Davis, Bryan Behrenshausen, Calum Matheson, and Kurt Zemlicka. They are all doing such amazing political and intellectual work. Watch out for them!

I thank a disparate set of others whom I have run into, some regularly, on this long road of writing, whose questions, comments, answers, late night conversations, and emails and texts with links and photos have left their mark on this book. I thank Miranda Brady, Jack Bratich, Cathy N. Davidson, Radhika Gajjala, Ron Greene, Mark Hayward, Matt Jordan, Julia Kaisla, Chad Lavin, Marina Levina, Sara Martel, Matt May, Matt McAllister, Elizabeth Mazzolini, Rob Mitchell, Erika Polson, Craig Robertson, Michelle Rodino-Colocino, Gil Rodman, Chris Russill, Jennifer Daryl Slack, Jonathan Sterne, Patty Sotirin, Rebecca Walsh, Steve Wiley. I thank Ron Chan for opening up the entire world of business traveling for me which inspired an entire chapter. A special thank you to Kate Maddalena for helping me with my final draft. And then there are the distant mentors who you only realize much later completely altered your course. For this, I thank Paul Mier for his very early mentorship and his political theory courses at Capilano College in North Vancouver. By insisting that I should leave the continent to pursue a master's degree in London, he instigated the beginning of a life spent waiting in airports, bus stations, train stations, and visa- and immigration-processing centers—the very places that gave rise to many of the ideas explored in these pages. Finally, I want to thank James Hay whose serendipitous putting together of two panels at Crossroads in Cultural Studies in 2004 on mobility and space gave me a new perspective on my work. His very early support and excitement over this project made a huge difference. I believe it was him who forced me to talk to Ken Wissoker years before I wanted to.

And, ultimately there would be no *In the Meantime* had Ken Wissoker of Duke University Press not believed in this project when it was barely a book. He was always excited and always encouraging even when I felt

it was impossible. I thank him for giving me this chance and for finding such capable anonymous reviewers who provided invaluable insight and advice through various stages of this project. Thank you also to Elizabeth Ault and Sara Leone for their good humor and care they have taken with my manuscript.

There are also the people who may or may not be part of my academic life but have provided the sustenance and forms of care that makes possible writing here: Grover, Claudia, Anna and Thomas, Steve and Myriam, Kumi and David, Nick and Danielle, Jina and Alan. Thank you to my family: my mother, Asha, for inspiring an entire chapter (and probably my next book as well) and providing (with Harry) so much childcare during summer writing sessions in Vancouver; my father, Bill, for teaching me the importance of the 7 Ps; my sister, Serena, for being my number one interlocutor; and Ineke, Sue and Scott, for all their support along the way.

And finally, this book is for Jeremy Packer. Where do I begin? He knows this book better than anyone else. I thank him for all the mornings he whisked Zyla away on mini-adventures so I could write. He is father extraordinaire. But most of all, I thank him for the conversations that never end, his passionate and smart heart, and being the one I travel with.

Introduction

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TEMPO TANTRUMS

Speed and the Cultural Politics of Time

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At the scramble crossing outside Shibuya Station in Tokyo, motorized traffic stops in all directions to allow the throngs of pedestrians to pass (see figures I.1 and I.2). Thousands of people move through the intersection at any one time. The subway lines below street level service two and a half million people daily. Underground there is another entirely separate shopping and business district, at least a mile in scope, called Shibuchinko. Shibuya is to transportation as Shibuchinko is to trade—its halls filled with high-end boutiques and trendy goods. The crossing at Shibuya pulses with an intensity incomparable to any other city street in the world.

To say that Shibuya is hypermediated is an understatement. Surveillance cameras hover above the crossing in every corner. The blinding flash of neon displays, with their constantly changing content, draw the eye up into an urban panorama of vertical space, where television screens hail the crowds in every direction. Visual spectacles are mounted and projected to cover the facades of the high-rises.

FIGURE I.1. (top) A skyline view of Shibuya scramble crossing.
FIGURE I.2. (bottom) Shibuya scramble crossing in the rain. Photos by Jeremy Packer.

Professional videographers and journalists are on site all day, every day, seeking the latest trends, interviewing passersby, editing on the spot, and then airing their products instantaneously on the media displays above. Everything is instantly, incessantly updated. The crowds on the street are sourced, inscribed on a screen, and displayed back to themselves in a matter of minutes. Fashions can go out of style before they reach the other side of the street. Shibuya pulsates with information turnover; goods, people, money, trivia, and ads circulate in a seemingly endless stream. Everyone is either looking up at the screens or staring down at their hands as they skillfully text while they wait to cross. Others have phones glued to their ears. Shibuya is said to have a higher density of cell phones than anywhere else on earth.[1]

For card-carrying members of the new information economy, such as gamers and game developers, technophiles, fashionistas, pop culture junkies, advertisers, and software engineers, the speed of life in Shibuya may well be pure magic, full of endless possibilities. In fact, the cyber utopian Howard Rheingold references Shibuya as proof of the coming technological revolution ushered in by cell phones and texting.[2] Shibuya signifies a future that is densely inhabited by creative, energetic, tech-savvy, and forward-thinking types. People and capital seem unencumbered and almost immaterial, flowing without inhibitions. Shibuya represents the evolution of technology and commerce in a networked and creative humanity. At Shibuya, the market effortlessly and instantly fulfills endless consumer needs.

For critical theorists of globalization and technology, Shibuya is emblematic of something much bleaker: what Paul Virilio terms the "overexposed city," where physical architecture is displaced by the nonplace spectacles of billboards, neon lights, and surveillance cameras.[3] The crossing is saturated with instant transmissions and real-time communications; even the buildings are screens. And the content of those communications are commodity; Shibuya's massive consumer spectacle mocks the political potential of public space. As Virilio argues, when space yields to time, democracy fails: "Today we have achieved three attributes of the divine: ubiquity, instantaneity, immediacy; omnivoyance and omnipotence. This is no longer a question of democracy; this is tyranny."[4] From Virilio's perspective, the crowds at Shibuya are full of cyborg-consumer-citizens: plugged in and plugging away, all consumed and consuming as they watch and are themselves watched. Shibuya feeds off of people and then feeds them back into the system. Surveillance is normalized and made pleasurable in fun,

panoptic fashion shows. You have to look good because at any given minute you may be exhibited. The crowds may be informed and informative, but they are also information. For those alarmed by the new phase of hyper-capitalism, Shibuya starkly demonstrates the new gods of sped-up, mobile information capitalism—Nokia and Sony—and their ability to turn people into weightless data.

Standing at a more figurative scramble crossing, a crossroads of schools of thought, one can veer right for utopia, with Rheingold and the fashion-istas, or left for dystopia, with theorists like Virilio. But there is another way to cross this intersection that allows for more complex insight into the politics of time and space ushered in by global capitalism, and that way involves awareness of power relations as they play out in time—a concept I will call *temporality*. There are multiple interdependent and relational temporalities tangled together at Shibuya. People play and shop in Shibuya, but people are also at work. The crowds at Shibuya change and shift at different hours and on different days. At different moments luxury consumers, bargain hunters, salarymen, Harajuku Girls, drunks, high school students, the unemployed, retailers, construction workers, cleaning staff, tourists, taxi drivers, traffic-directing cops, delivery vans, private chauffeurs, garbage collectors, and commuters dominate the space. Around five in the morning, overworked salarymen, who have been up all night drinking (and who have grabbed a couple hours of sleep in one of the tiny capsule hotels nearby), make their way across the scramble, their gaits slow and unsteady. Just two hours later, a new set of salarymen in fresh suits appear with quick, determined steps—the two groups clearly demarcating yesterday and today. Cleaning staff members carrying brooms and mops come hours later. The streets temporarily empty after the morning rush; the shops open, and students with their book bags and mothers with children make their appearance. Transient figures emerge later in the afternoon and into the late night: tourists, drunks, *otaku*, and the homeless. In a hotel, situated above the rooftops in Shibuya, an even more complex sense of the multiplicity of time emerges. The tops of the buildings are full of workers taking time for cigarettes, food, and exercise. One building has a tennis court and another a makeshift track where uniformed workers can be seen doing slow laps.

I stayed in Shibuya for two weeks to see if I could tease out some individual threads in its temporal, material, technological, and cultural tangle. After a few days of observation, I began to recognize the same figures ap-

pearing at the same times throughout the day. I saw that Shibuya is hardly about speed or spectacle or a coming technological revolution. The people that move through Shibuya might all be speeding across the scramble, but as they move, they remain distinct; they represent discrepant forms of labor constituted in time in a variety of inequitable ways. The figures at the scramble crossing best exemplify not so much the speed of life in Shibuya but the different temporal itineraries that constitute social space there. The crossing is shared by masses of people whose convergence is not random but temporally ordered. They come to inhabit and experience time and the crossing differently, depending on where they fit within a larger grid of time(s).

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a set of questions that focused on the impact of technologies built for acceleration and faster-moving capital on the democratic fate of a sped-up globe emerged across the disciplines. I call this line of critical inquiry *speed theory*. Virilio was one of the first to write of speed in this vein, in France during the 1970s, and he remains its most prominent figure.[5] As wild and aphoristic as Virilio's work is, it has given rise to research and writing within fields as diverse as media studies, cultural geography, political theory, sociology, critical theory, and cultural studies. The culture of speed, as it appears in such various conversations, goes by many terms: *24/7 capitalism* (Jonathan Crary), *the chronoscopic society* (Robert Hassan), *fast capital* (Ben Agger), *the new temporalities of biopolitical production* (Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri), *the culture of acceleration* (John Tomlinson), *chronodystopia* (John Armitage and Joanne Roberts), *hypermodern times* (Gilles Lipovetsky), and *liquid times* (Zygmunt Bauman).[6] Of course, the advent of the new millennium isn't the first time that speed has been the object of critical inquiry. Such work fits within an important trajectory of thought that includes histories of capital as it became coterminous with different technologies and their temporal and spatial effects. These critical histories describe clocks, trains, telegraphs, and other global metronomes with their attendant temporal dictates of ticks, tocks, nanoseconds, and light-years.[7] Speeding up gives rise to new cultural imaginaries as well as artistic movements.[8] Much of the focus in media theory has so far explored how changes in technological pace translate into entirely new social realities. In the 1970s, Marshall McLuhan famously prophesized that the speed of electronic communication would culminate in the harmonization and connection of all of humanity into a "global village."[9] That we are living in a 24/7, always-on, and on-the-go world con-

tinues to be the assumed starting point for much critical analysis of globalization, media, and democracy.

While critical theorists of speed examine different elements of speed culture, there is a shared sentiment: new technologies and faster moving capital herald grave political and social consequences. Unlike McLuhan and other cyber utopians, speed theorists are not so much interested in the liberating potential of sped-up technologies to connect Others. Instead, the contemporary theorist of speed is concerned about how a culture of speed is antithetical to democracy. They share a similar cautionary tale: Speed is the commanding byproduct of a mutually reinforcing complex that includes global capital, real-time communication technologies, military technologies, and scientific research on human bodies. Democratic deliberation gives over to instant communication. Political interaction is replaced by monetary transaction. Space, the apparent *real* ground of politics, is subsumed by speed and what Virilio calls the "tyranny of real-time."[10] Speed theorists argue that geopolitics (a politics based in space) is supplanted by chronopolitics (a politics based in time). The yielding of space to time not only dissolves the grounding of politics but also gives rise to a way of being in time that is adverse to a political public sphere. Moreover, rather than facilitating an egalitarian global village, the yielding of space to time divides the citizenry into a temporal binary. There are two temporal poles of chronopolitical life: fast classes and slow classes (Virilio), tourists and vagabonds (Bauman), inhabitants of chronotopia and chronodystopia (Armitage and Roberts), and the time rich and the time poor (Jeremy Rifkin).[11] These two temporal classes are imagined to be much like distant ships that never pass, unknown to the other.

This book argues that speed theorists have offered too simple an account of the acceleration of everyday life and temporal difference. Speed theorists have been the subject of substantial criticism for mimicking the tone of marketers and multinational corporations who want us all to believe the same thing: that we are again on the verge of utopia, living in new times.[12] But as wild and aphoristic as this theory is, it is worth paying significant attention to. It is not just a theoretical assumption that these are fast times. This notion has become rather common sense, if not a cultural fixation. In all this attention to time, however, the complexity of lived time is absent. It has not been addressed in speed theory, nor is it taken up in any substantial way by those who have critiqued speed theory for providing the digital age its "sacred canopy."[13] Recognition of differential lived time

is also ignored in everyday discussions about life getting faster. But that is hardly surprising. Running out of time is largely felt and imagined to be an individual problem, even when the critique is aimed at society.

Speed theory is without a doubt indebted to Marx's formulation of the clock's quantification of work and the production of value and socially necessary time.[14] Speed theory is also largely sympathetic to E. P. Thompson's thesis in *Time, Work, and Industrial Capitalism*, which is concerned with how the new chronometers imposed by governmental, military, and capitalist interests have replaced earlier, collective perceptions of time that he believed flowed from the collective wisdom of human societies.[15] Marx has been fundamental to thinking about the annihilation of space by time, a change ushered in by chronometers and capitalist time frames. Marx and Thompson are both necessary to thinking about how capital robs the worker of time, whether by diminishing personal time, controlling the bounds of a working day, stalling clocks, or establishing the age limits of child labor. Yet the protagonist, in the contemporary work on speedup and time-space compression, is no longer the worker or any specific subjugated population. Instead, the protagonist is a generalized individual—an everyday subject—who is suddenly out of time. While pointing out the indentured conditions of contemporary labor and living brought on by ubiquitous technologies is an important analysis of contemporary life, it does not deal with the uneven cultural politics of time. In fact, ignoring differential time exacerbates inequitable temporal relations. Without attention to multiple temporalities, the subject of value in the critique of speed ends up being the same subject who will confirm speedup most readily as *the* reality—the consumer of new technological gadgets (tomorrow's garbage), the jet-setter who can't remember which airport he's in, the disoriented postmodern theorist, or the tired and overworked academic whose blackberry is keeping him or her "on" 24/7.

While the imposing world of clocks, trains, and temporal grids of empires and civilizations is central to the history of capital and social control, *In the Meantime* offers an approach to time that is about the micropolitics of temporal coordination and social control between multiple temporalities. In speed theory, synchronization accounts for the relationship between technology and the social body, political body, and biological body.[16] *In the Meantime* focuses instead on how synchronicity is at the heart of everyday material relations. Thus, the image of an observatory keeping the time of the ships as they move at different speeds, at different distances,

scattered across the ocean, gives way to a more commonplace scenario within the urban fabric: a business traveler calling a taxi with a mobile device, and the taxi driver texting his wife to say that he won't be home until the morning.

This book traces these multiple threads of lived time: Frequent business travelers hail cabs to the airport, late for their flights. Taxicabs speed up and slow down at the will of their backseat passengers. Maids at high-end hotels clean suites designed to cater to the jet-lagged; some of them have been trained to deal specifically with jet-lagged travelers. Nine-to-fivers take express hour-long lunchtime yoga classes at work in order to get through the day. Mobile yoga instructors arrive at corporate offices, making pitches to managers about the benefits of yoga for employee productivity. Slow-food connoisseurs are seated in slow-food establishments across Europe and North America. They are enjoying their slow-cooked meals, but an exploited service staff hurriedly cleans their dishes. Fiber affects fiber across the social fabric. The fibers are not randomly scattered; they are entangled with one another in time. They are much like the ships and the "slave" clocks of Big Ben and the Royal Observatory, Greenwich, that are referred to in the histories of capital and world standard time.[17] These fibers, these temporalities, compose the chapters of *In the Meantime*.

Temporalities are not times; like continually broken clocks, they must be reset again and again. They are expected to recalibrate and fit into a larger temporal order. Temporalities do not experience a uniform time but rather a time particular to the labor that produces them. Their experience of time depends on where they are positioned within a larger economy of temporal worth. The temporal subject's living day, as part of its livelihood, includes technologies of the self contrived for synchronizing to the time of others or having others synchronize to them. The meaning of these subjects' own times and experiences of time is in large part structured and controlled by both the institutional arrangements they inhabit and the time of others — other temporalities.

By following and describing several examples of multiple, entangled temporalities — frequent business travelers, taxi drivers, yoga instructors, slow lifers, and desk workers — *In the Meantime* critiques a tacit acceptance that the world is getting faster by examining instead how the discourse of speedup is part of the problematic cultural context in which people understand and experience time. Such an approach means contending with the fact that the critique of speed is also a discourse — one that privileges cer-